UNIT-1: INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1. Learning Objectives

1.2. Introduction

1.3. Ethical thinking

1.4. Different ethical philosophies

1.5. Absolutist Ethics

1.5.1 Moral Absolutism

1.6. Ethical relativism

1.7. Existential Ethics

1.8. Situational Ethics

1.9. Evolutionary Ethics

1.10. Descriptive Ethics

1.11. Applied Ethics

1.11.1 Bio-ethics

1.11.2 Environmental Ethics

1.11.3 Business Ethics

1.12. Conclusion

1.13. Let us sum up

1.14. Further Reading

1.15. Answer to check your progress

1.16. Model questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Define what is ethics
- Explain what is ethical thinking
- Define what is absolutist ethics
- Discuss what relativism is
- Describe the existentialist ethics
- Define the situational ethics
- Define the evolutionary ethics

- Explain what is descriptive ethics
- Discuss the applied ethics

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Ethics is an important branch of philosophy which mainly studies about value or morality. If we see the etymological meaning of the term ethics, it will be seen that the word 'ethics' is mainly derived from one group adjective, i. e. 'ethical', which is actually derived from the term 'ethos'. It means customs, usages or habits. Ethics is also called 'moral philosophy'. The term 'moral' derives from a Latin word 'mores'. Which too mean 'customs' or 'habits'? It is not the case that customs are something which is associated with habits. They are approved by the group of a society also. Ethics can be regarded to be the science of rightness and wrongness of conduct. Conduct is called the purposive action that involves choice and will. It is the science of morality.

Ethics is not a science like psychology, which is concerned with the origin and growth of conduct. Ethics is something, which is concerned with the evaluation of conduct with reference to an ideal. So far as ethics is concerned, it can also be regarded to be a science as it aims at systematic explanation of rightness and wrongness or our voluntary actions in the light of the Highest Good of man. Ethics is a normative science. Normative science is something, which deals with values and the norms which regulated human life. Normative science deals with systematic valuing of or voluntary actions.

1.3: ETHICAL THINKING:

From the above discussion, it becomes clear to us what actually ethics is. Now question is what is ethical thinking? While we are talking about ethical thinking, the main thing here is the nature of our thinking. We can do a work from different angles. In this regard we can present some arguments which are accepted by both Socrates and his Crito as valid...1) that we ought never to harm anyone, 2) That we ought to keep our promises, and 3) that we ought to obey or respect our parents and teachers. When

our actions will be done by considering these ideas to be in mind then it can be said that these actions are guided by ethics or morality. So it can finally be said that the thinking, which guides our action in ethical or moral way or manner is called ethical thinking.

1.4: DIFFERENT ETHICAL PHILOSOPHIES:

There are different ethical theories, which have played very important role in ethics. Some of the contemporary and important theories of ethics are as follows....absolutist ethics, ethical relativism, existentialist ethics, Situation ethics, the concept of applied ethics, evolutionary ethics and descriptive ethics.

1.5: ABSOLUTISM:

The word 'absolutism' can be understood both from moral and political perspective. From the moral point of view, 'absolutism' refers to at least two distinct doctrines. First, absolutism may be understood as the claim that there exists a universally valid moral system, which applies to everyone whether they realize it or not. In this sense, absolutism is just opposite to moral relativism. According to moral relativism the existence of universally applicable moral principles is not possible. Secondly, absolutism accepts that moral rules or principles do not admit any exceptions. In this regard we can take the name of Immanuel Kant as an absolutist with respect to lying, because he held that it is never permissible to lie. This variety of absolutist need not maintain that all moral principles are absolute.

1.5.1: Moral Absolutism:

'Moral Absolutism is an ethical theory, according to which some actions (action-types) are absolutely forbidden. Absolutism, for example, will regard that killing is wrong, or always wrong to lie, or always wrong to torture other. The important point here is that absolutism is not a theory, which uses to prohibit actions absolutely. Absolutism upholds only the formal requirement that some moral principles admit of no exceptions. Moral

absolutism is always found to be the opposite of consequentialism. Consequentialism is a theory according to which actions are right just in case they promote overall value in comparison with other alternatives. It means that no action is absolutely wrong For example, torturing a small child may produce more value (or less disvalue) than the killing of an entire nation. Therefore, for a consequentialist, torturing a small child in order to save a country is permissible. On the contrary, moral absolutism regards that some actions are absolutely wrong and those actions can never be right, whatever may be consequences it uses to produces. So, an absolutist will regard that it is morally wrong to torture a child in order to save an entire nation.

One question may occur in this case, i.e., which actions or types of action are traditionally regarded as absolutely wrong? Historically, philosophers have been absolutists with regarded to many types of actions such as lying, adultery, and sodomy. But in a contemporary setting, torture and executing the innocent are two of the actions most commonly considered to be absolutely wrong. Immanuel Kant, Charles Fried are some of the deontologists who had supported absolutists.

1.6: ETHICAL RELATIVISM:

Ethical relativism is an ethical theory according to which there are no universally accepted ethical standards. According to ethical relativism, there is no objective standard of right and wrong, not even in principle. There can be only different views of what is right and what is wrong. According to Ethical relativism, actually there cannot be any objective relativism.

The concept of ethical relativism can be more properly understood by comparing the views of the status of ethics and ethical matters with the ordinary beliefs about science. It is commonly believed that the natural sciences like physics, chemistry, biology etc. tells us things about the natural world. Throughout the centuries, and modern times in particular, science

seems to have made great progress in uncovering the nature and structure of the world. So far as scientific theories or laws are concerned, they are same and true under all circumstances or situations. In fact throughout the centuries, including the modern period, science has made great progress in uncovering the nature and structure of this world. Scientific knowledge is considered to be valid knowledge and it is not varying from person to person or to situation to situation.

But on the other hand, morality is different form positive science. There is always a chance of disagreement of opinion in morality. Actually it is stated that morality is nothing but a matter of subjective opinion. Morality is simply a function of the moral beliefs that people have and this is the conclusion of ethical relativism. It is found that there is no realm of objective moral truth or reality exists that is comparable to that which is found in the world of nature investigated by science. There are two forms of ethical relativism. The first type of ethical relativism is called personal or individual ethical relativism and the other is called social or cultural ethical relativism. According to personal or individual ethical relativism, ethical judgments and beliefs are the expressions of the moral outlook and attitudes of individual persons. Different individuals may have different moral views regarding an issue. These different views can neither be regarded as wrong or right. Moral statements are neither correct nor incorrect. To judge the correctness or incorrectness, first one objective standard have to exist. But according to ethical relativism, a proper standard actually does not exist.

On the other hand, social or cultural ethical relativism regards that ethical relativism varies from society to society and the basis for moral judgments lies in these social or cultural views. If an individual is to decide, what is right, then he must have to see it in terms of social norms. According to a cultural relativist, one society's view cannot be regarded to be better than the other society's view. Some view may be different from other and some society's view may not be accepted by wider group of the society. According to ethical relativism it does not make that view worse or more backward or incorrect in any objective sense.

1.7: EXISTENTIALIST ETHICS:

Rarely some philosophers other than Jean-Paul Sartre have emphasized as much that we are entirely responsible for not only what we are but also what we will be. If we are to look at ourselves and we will find that we are unhappy or we are in circumstances which limit us, then according to Sartre we have to blame ourselves only. a) We do not have the right to blame anybody for their influence. According to Sartre, if somebody has influenced us, it is our fault as we have allowed them to do so. b) Secondly if we allow others to influence what we really want, we are inauthentic human beings living in bad faith. We usually become this way through "trying to get along." We do not have the moral courage to "lead our own lives" and set up our own projects. Instead, we drift from thing to thing, being "controlled," so we think, by external circumstances.

Sartre has maintained one important statement, i.e. "existence precedes essence". Existence means the fact of being, the presence of something, which can also be called the "thisness," or "that it is." On the other hand, essence means the kind of thing it is, the blueprint, plan, or description, the nature of the thing, or "what it is. Sartre here tries to maintain that man intrinsically has no nature. It means that a man is thrown into this world, not of his own making, and is condemned to determine what he will be. In other words, our "existence precedes our essence." We exist first and determine our essence by means of choice. Contrast this view with mainstream Christianity. Man's nature comes first--man is a sinner. Consequently, here, essence precedes existence, since man is entirely subject to God's plan.

It is believed by existentialists that "in choosing myself, I choose man." With the help of choices, one man uses to determine or create what is going to be. These choices are mainly the choices a man things to be right or what to be. Consequently, a man uses to create ourselves according to what we think a person ought to be. This image is, then, what we think man ought to be. According to Sartre one is responsible for what he is. A

person is also responsible for other human being of the earth as his actions are responsible for the mankind. In one sense it can be said that, in deciding something, one is putting a universal value to his act by deciding in accordance with the belief that all persons in this situation should act in this manner. One person's choices are a model for the way everyone should choose. If one denies this fact, people are in self-deception. Sartre's first work of ethics can be regarded to be Being and Nothingness. Sartre tried to find out a theory of ethics based on the concepts of human need and the ideal of "integral man" in contrast with its counter-concept, the "sub-human". Existentialist ethics is something that adds to the existing ethics is a more specific content and a keener sense of the social conditions for living a properly human life.

1.8: SITUATIONAL ETHICS:

Situational ethics, or situation ethics, is a teleological and consequentialist theory of ethics that concerns with the outcome of an action. Situational ethics is opposed to the theory, where an action is regarded to be intrinsically wrong as we find in the case of deontological theories. This theory is originally developed in the 1960s by the Christian Episcopal priest Joseph Fletcher in two books written by him entitled, The Classic Treatment and Situation Ethics. According to Fletcher, sometimes moral principles can be cast aside in certain situations if love (agape) is best served for in Christianity. According to him 'Love is the ultimate law'. Fletcher strongly believes that in order to establish an ethical system, one must have to based on the principle of love, that is the best way to express the Christian principle of 'love thy neighbour' found in Bible. He believes that there are no absolute laws other than the law of Agape love and all the other laws were secondary and subsumed by agape in order to achieve the greatest amount of this love. This means that all the other laws are only contingent on agape, and thus they may be broken if other courses of action would result in more love. Thus, in the case of situational ethics, the ends can justify the means. According to situation ethics, right and wrong depend upon the situation.

There are no universal moral rules or rights in situation ethics. Here all the cases are considered to be unique and deserve to have a unique solution.

1.9: EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS:

Evolutionary ethics is a form of ethics, which tries to bridge the gap between philosophy and the natural sciences with the help of argument that the natural selection has instilled human beings with a moral sense, a disposition to be good. If this is considered to be true, then morality can be understood as a phenomenon that arises automatically during the evolution of sociable, intelligent beings. It does not arise, as the result of divine revelation or the application of our rational faculties. But theologians or philosophers argue that the morality actually arises as the result of divine revelation or the application of human's rational thinking. Morality would be interpreted as a useful adaptation that increases the fitness of its holders by providing a selective advantage. The challenge for evolutionary biologists such as Wilson is to define goodness with reference to evolutionary theory and then explain why human beings ought to be good. Evolutionary ethics has been more successful in providing interesting answers in Meta ethics.

Evolutionary ethics can be regarded to be of three types. They are descriptive evolutionary ethics, meta-ethical evolutionary ethics and normative evolutionary ethics.

Descriptive evolutionary ethics is that which consists of biological approaches to morality. This is based on the alleged role of evolution in shaping human psychology and behaviour.

Normative evolutionary ethics on the other hand is that, which seeks not to explain moral behaviour, but to justify normative ethical theories or claims.

Evolutionary Meta-ethics is something which asks about the fact that how evolutionary theory deals with the theories of ethical discourse. It also deals with the question of whether objective moral values exist and

what is the possibility of objective moral knowledge.

1.10: DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS:

Descriptive ethics is a kind of empirical research which deals with the attitudes of individuals or groups of people. On the other words, it can be said that this is the division of philosophical or general ethics that involves the observation of the moral decision-making process with the goal of describing the phenomenon. The supporters of descriptive ethics tries make the people believe about things like values, which actions are right and wrong, and which characteristics of moral agents are virtuous. If a deep research into descriptive ethics has done, then it may also investigate people's ethical ideals or what actions societies reward or punish in law or politics. In descriptive ethics, what ought to be noted is that the culture is generational and not static. That is why, a new generation expect to come with its own set of morals and that qualifies to be new sets of ethics. Descriptive ethics therefore always tries to oversee whether ethics still holds its place.

As we have found that descriptive ethics involves in empirical investigation, this field is usually investigated by those people, who are working in the fields of evolutionary biology, psychology, sociology or anthropology. Informations those use to come from descriptive ethics are, however, also used in philosophical arguments. Value theory can be either normative or descriptive but is usually descriptive.

Descriptive ethics does not explicitly perceive the relationship between good and bad ethical theories. It can be explained in the following two ways.

- Descriptive ethics claims, implicitly or explicitly, that amorality (not to be confused with immorality) is moral. Descriptive ethics thus embraces moral relativism. or,
- Descriptive ethics makes no claim that amorality is moral. Its innate

amorality is solely due to a practical division of labour between descriptive ethics and normative ethics.

The first position holds descriptive ethics to be in competition with normative ethics, whereas the second holds it as complementary to normative ethics.

1.11: APPLIED ETHICS:

Applied ethics is an important branch of philosophy or more specifically is of ethics. Applied ethics generally use to assume an affirmative answer to the existence question that is related to addressing the moral permissibility of specific actions and practices. Applied ethics deals with real life issues like abortion, euthanasia, environmental issues, business ethics etc. It starts with certain moral questions like "under what conditions, is an abortion morally permissible?" it can be said that applied ethics is that branch of ethics, which is concerned with the analysis of particular moral issues in private and public life. There are certain branches of applied ethics. They are as follows:

1.11.1: Bioethics:

bioethics is the philosophical study of the ethical issues emerging form advances in biology and medicine. It is also a branch of applied ethics which directly deals with medical policies and practice. The supporters and thinkers of bio-ethics are more concerned with the ethical questions that arise in the relationships among life sciences, biotechnology etc. It includes with its scope the study of values and its relationship with the field of medicine. Bio-ethics deals with various issues related to the euthanasia, abortion, embryo killing or use of embryo in research (stem-cell research) etc.

1.11.2: Environmental Ethics:

Environmental ethics is also comes under bioethics, which deals with ethical issues related with the environment. It mainly concerned with

ecological issues such as the responsibility of government and corporations to clean up pollution etc. The academic field of environmental ethics grew up in response to the work of scientists such as Rachel Carson and events such as the first Earth day in 1070.

1.11.3: Business Ethics:

Business ethics can also be called corporate ethics. It examines ethical principles or morals or ethical problems that arise in a business environment. It is a form of applied ethics, which is applied to all aspects business conduct and is also relevant to the conduct of individual and entire organisations. Business ethics is something which referrers to contemporary organisational standards, principles, set of values and norms that govern the actions and behaviour of an individual in the business organisation.

These are some main branches of applied ethics. With those branches, we also find some other form of applied ethics, namely, engineering ethics, social ethics, media ethics etc. All these issues have been studied from ethical point of view and analysed with the help of important ethical theories like Kantian de-ontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics etc.

1.12: Conclusion:

So from the above discussion it can be said that ethics is an important part of any study. There are some important contemporary ethical theories which have been discussed above. All these theories are playing a significant role so far as ethical thinking of human beings are concerned. Any of our actions can only be fruitful and will be actually helpful for the society, when actions will be guided by value or moral thinking. So to know about the ethical theories and to apply them in our actins is very necessary.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: What ethics mainly studies?

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Q2: How the word 'absolutism' can be understood?

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Q3: What is consequentialism?

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Q4: According to ethical relativism, relativism is objective or subjective?

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Q5: How many ethical relativisms are there?

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Q6: Name one philosopher, who has supported existentialist ethics?

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Q7: Who has written the book, "Being and Nothingness"?

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Q8: Where from the concept 'love thy neighbour' derived from?

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Q9: What is descriptive evolutionary ethics?

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Q9: What is the other name of "business ethics"?

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1.13: LET US SUM UP

- Ethics is an important branch of philosophy which mainly studies about value or morality.
- Ethics is not a science like psychology, which is concerned with the origin and growth of conduct.

- Scientific knowledge is considered to be valid knowledge and it is not varying from person to person or to situation to situation.
- According to personal or individual ethical relativism, ethical judgments and beliefs are the expressions of the moral outlook and attitudes of individual persons.
- The concept of ethical relativism can be more properly understood by comparing the views of the status of ethics and ethical matters with the ordinary beliefs about science.
- Rarely some philosophers other than Jean-Paul Sartre have emphasized as much that we are entirely responsible for not only what we are but also what we will be.
- Sartre has maintained one important statement, i.e. "existence precedes essence".
- It is believed by existentialists that "in choosing myself, I choose man." With the help of choices, one man uses to determine or create what is going to be.
- Situational ethics, or situation ethics, is a teleological and consequentialist theory of ethics that concerns with the outcome of an action.
- Situational ethics is opposed to the theory, where an action is regarded to be intrinsically wrong as we find in the case of deontological theories.
- According to situation ethics, right and wrong depend upon the situation.
- There are no universal moral rules or rights in situation ethics.
- Here all the cases are considered to be unique and deserve to have a unique solution.
- Evolutionary ethics has been more successful in providing interesting answers in Meta ethics.

- Descriptive ethics is a kind of empirical research which deals with the attitudes of individuals or groups of people.
- On the other words, it can be said that this is the division of philosophical or general ethics that involves the observation of the moral decision-making process with the goal of describing the phenomenon.
- Descriptive ethics does not explicitly perceive the relationship between good and bad ethical theories.
- Applied ethics is an important branch of philosophy or more specifically is of ethics.
- Applied ethics generally use to assume an affirmative answer to the existence question that is related to addressing the moral permissibility of specific actions and practices.
- Applied ethics deals with real life issues like abortion, euthanasia, environmental issues, business ethics etc.



1.14: FURTHER READING:

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2) Guha, D. (2007). Practical and Professional Ethicsssional Ethics. Concept Publishing Company.
3) Mohapatra, P. K. (2008). Ethics and Society: An Essay in Applied Ethics. Concept Publishing Company.
4) Sharma, R. N. (2006). Introduction to Ethics. Surjeet Publications.
5) Singer, P. (2003). Practical Ethics. Cambridge University Press.
6) Sinha, J. (2001). A Manual of Ethics. New Central Book (P) Ltd



1.15: ANSWERS OF CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1:Value or morality

Ans to Q 2: The word 'absolutism' can be understood both from moral and political perspective.

Ans to Q 3: Consequentialism is a theory according which actions are right just in case they promote overall value in comparison with other alternatives.

Ans to Q 4: Objective.

Ans to Q 5: There are two kinds of ethical relativism, namely a) personal or individual ethical relativism, b) social or cultural ethical relativism

Ans to Q 6: Jean-Paul Sartre.

Ans to Q 7: Jean-Paul Sartre.

Ans to Q 8: Bible

Ans to Q 9: Descriptive evolutionary ethics is that which consists of biological approaches to morality.

Ans to Q 10: Corporate Ethics.



1.16: MODEL QUESTIONS:

A. Very short Questions

Q1: Write the etymological meaning of the term 'ethics'.

Q2: Write the name of two contemporary forms of ethics.

Q3: Define ethical relativism.

Q4: What are the two types of ethical relativism?

Q5: Who has written the book, "The Classic Treatment and Situation Ethics"?

Q6: Define normative evolutionary ethics.

B. Short Questions (Write in about 100-150 words)

Q1: What is descriptive ethics?

Q2: Define bio-ethics?

Q3: What is business ethics?

Q4: What is evolutionary ethics?

Q5: Write a short note on ethical thinking.

Q6: Why ethics is considered to be a normative science?

C. Long Questions (Write in about 300 words)

Q1: Describe what is 'ethics' and what is 'ethical thinking'?

Q2: Explain 'absolutism'.

Q3: Discuss ethical relativism.

Q4: What is existentialist ethics? Explain.

Q5: What is applied ethics? Discuss.

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