

## UG semester 4 ( paper -1) Indian & Western Ethics

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**Ethics or moral philosophy** is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. The field of ethics, along with aesthetics, concerns matters of value, and thus comprises the branch of philosophy called axiology.

Ethics seeks to resolve questions of human morality by defining concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime. As a field of intellectual inquiry, moral philosophy also is related to the fields of moral psychology, descriptive ethics and value theory.

The English word "ethics" is derived from the Ancient Greek word *ēthikós*, meaning "relating to one's character", which itself comes from the root word *ēthos* meaning "character, moral nature". This word was transferred into Latin as *ethica* and then into French as *éthique*, from which it was transferred into English.

Rushworth Kidder states that "standard definitions of *ethics* have typically included such phrases as 'the science of the ideal human character' or 'the science of moral duty'". Richard William Paul and Linda Elder define ethics as "a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures". The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy states that the word "ethics" is "commonly used interchangeably with morality ... and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group or individual." Paul and Elder state that most people confuse ethics with behaving in accordance with social conventions, religious beliefs and the law and don't treat ethics as a stand-alone concept.

The word *ethics* in English refers to several things. It can refer to philosophical ethics or moral philosophy—a project that attempts to use reason to answer various kinds of ethical questions. As the English philosopher Bernard

Williams writes, attempting to explain moral philosophy: "What makes an inquiry a philosophical one is reflective generality and a style of argument that claims to be rationally persuasive." Williams describes the content of this area of inquiry as addressing the very broad question, "how one should live". Ethics can also refer to a common human ability to think about ethical problems that is not particular to philosophy. As bioethicist Larry Churchill has written: "Ethics, understood as the capacity to think critically about moral values and direct our actions in terms of such values, is a generic human capacity." Ethics can also be used to describe a particular person's own idiosyncratic principles or habits. For example: "Joe has strange ethics."

## **Classification of Ethics-**

### **1. Normative Ethics**

### **2. Meta-ethics**

### **3. and Applied Ethics**

*Normative ethics* is interested in determining the content of our moral behavior. Normative ethical theories seek to provide action-guides; procedures for answering the Practical Question ("What ought I to do?"). The moral theories of Kant and Bentham are examples of normative theories that seek to provide guidelines for determining a specific course of moral action. Think of the Categorical Imperative in the case of the former and the Principle of Utility in the case of the latter.

*Metaethics* talks about the nature of ethics and moral reasoning. Discussions about whether ethics is relative and whether we always act from self-interest are examples of meta-ethical discussions. In fact, drawing the conceptual distinction between Metaethics, Normative Ethics, and Applied Ethics is itself a "metaethical analysis."

*Applied Ethics* attempts to deal with specific realms of human action and to craft criteria for discussing issues that might arise within those realms. The contemporary field of Applied Ethics arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Today, it is a thriving part of the field of ethics. Numerous books and web-sites are devoted to topics such as Business Ethics, Computer Ethics, and Engineering Ethics. (See the Bio-Ethics Center for an example of activities in the area Medical Ethics).

## UNIT-3

### KANTIAN ETHICS

#### **German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)**

Kant, unlike Mill, believed that certain types of actions (including murder, theft, and lying) were absolutely prohibited, even in cases where the action would bring about more happiness than the alternative. For Kantians, there are two questions that we must ask ourselves whenever we decide to act: (i) Can I rationally will that *everyone* act as I propose to act? If the answer is no, then we must not perform the action. (ii) Does my action respect the goals of human beings rather than merely using them for my own purposes? Again, if the answer is no, then we must not perform the action. (Kant believed that these questions were equivalent).

Kant's theory is an example of a **deontological moral theory**—according to these theories, *the rightness or wrongness of actions does not depend on their consequences* but on whether they fulfill our duty.

Kant believed that there was a supreme principle of morality, and he referred to it as *The Categorical Imperative*. The *Categorical Imperative* determines what our moral duties are.

**Morality and imperatives:** *What does it mean for one's duty to be determined by the categorical imperative?*

**What is an imperative?** An imperative is a command. So, "Pay your taxes!" is an imperative, as are "Stop kicking me!" and "Don't kill animals!"

**Hypothetical Imperatives:** these imperatives command conditionally on your having a relevant desire. E.g. "If you want to go to medical school, study biology in college." If you don't want to go to medical school, this command doesn't apply to you. Another example, your father says, "if you are hungry, then go eat something!" - if you aren't hungry, then you are free to ignore the command.

**Categorical Imperatives:** These command unconditionally. E.g. "Don't cheat on your taxes." Even if you want to cheat and doing so would serve your interests, you may not cheat.

**What is the connection between morality and categorical imperatives?** Morality must be based on the categorical imperative because morality is such that you are commanded by it, and is such that you cannot opt out of it or claim that it does not apply to you.

**How does the categorical imperative work?** The categorical imperative has three different formulations. That is to say, there are three different ways of saying what it is. Kant claims that all three do in fact say the same thing, but it is currently disputed whether this is true. The second formulation is the easiest to understand, but the first one is most clearly a categorical imperative. Here is the first formulation.

1. First formulation (*The Formula of Universal Law*): Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law .

a. What is a maxim? A maxim is the rule or principle on which you act. For example, I might make it my maxim to give at least as much to charity each year as I spend on eating out, or I might make it my maxim only to do what will benefit some member of my family.

b. Basic idea: The command states, crudely, that you are not allowed to do anything yourself that you would not be willing to allow everyone else to do as well. You are not allowed to make exceptions for yourself. For example, if you expect other people to keep their promises, then you are obligated to keep your own promises.

c. More detail: More accurately, it commands that every maxim you act on must be such that you are willing to make it the case that everyone always act on that maxim when in a similar situation. For example, if I wanted to lie to get something I wanted, I would have to be willing to make it the case that everyone always lied to get what they wanted - but if this were to happen no one would ever believe you, so the lie would not work and you would not get what you wanted. So, if you willed that such a maxim (of lying) should become a universal law, then you would thwart your goal - thus, it is impermissible to lie, according to the categorical imperative. It is impermissible because the only way to lie is to make an exception for yourself.

Kant also has something to say about what makes someone a good person. Keep in mind that Kant intends this to go along with the rest of his theory, and what one's duty is would be determined by the categorical imperative. However, one can treat this as a separate theory to some extent, and consider that one's duty is determined by some other standard. Keep in mind that what is said below has to do with how one evaluates people, not actions. A person's actions are right or wrong, a person is morally worthy or lacks moral worth (i.e., is morally base). A person's actions determine her moral worth, but there is more to this than merely seeing if the actions are right or wrong.

**a. Background concepts:** This chart should help explain the basics.

**b. The basic idea:** Kant argues that a person is good or bad depending on the motivation of their actions and not on the goodness of the consequences of those actions. By "motivation" I mean what caused you to do the action (i.e., your reason for doing it). Kant argues that one can have moral worth (i.e., be a good person) only if one is motivated by morality. In other words, if a person's emotions or desires cause them to do something, then that action cannot give them moral worth. This may sound odd, but there is good reason to agree with Kant.

**c. Why motivation is what matters:** Imagine that I win the lottery and I'm wondering what to do with the money. I look around for what would be the most

fun to do with it: buy a yacht, travel in first class around the world, get that knee operation, etc.. I decide that what would be really fun is to give the money to charity and to enjoy that special feeling you get from making people happy, so I give all my lottery money away. According to Kant, I am not a morally worthy person because I did this, after all I just did whatever I thought would be the most fun and there is nothing admirable about such a selfish pursuit. It was just lucky for those charities that I thought giving away money was fun. Moral worth only comes when you do something because you know that it is your duty and you would do it regardless of whether you liked it.

**d. Why consequences don't matter:** A reason why Kant is not concerned with consequences can be seen in the following example. Imagine two people out together drinking at a bar late one night, and each of them decides to drive home very drunk. They drive in different directions through the middle of nowhere. One of them encounters no one on the road, and so gets home without incident regardless of totally reckless driving. The other drunk is not so lucky and encounters someone walking at night, and kills the pedestrian with the car. Kant would argue that based on these actions both drunks are equally bad, and the fact that one person got lucky does not make them any better than the other drunk. After all, they both made the same choices, and nothing within either one's control had anything to do with the difference in their actions. The same reasoning applies to people who act for the right reasons. If both people act for the right reasons, then both are morally worthy, even if the actions of one of them happen to lead to bad consequences by bad luck.

**e. The wrong interpretation:** Consider the case described above about the lottery winner giving to charity. Imagine that he gives to a charity and he intends to save hundreds of starving children in a remote village. The food arrives in the village but a group of rebels finds out that they have food, and they come to steal the food and end up killing all the children in the village and the adults too. The intended consequence of feeding starving children was good, and the actual consequences were bad. Kant is not saying that we should look at the intended consequences in order to make a moral evaluation. Kant is claiming that regardless of intended or actual consequences, moral worth is properly assessed by looking at the motivation of the action, which may be selfish even if the intended consequences are good.

**f. Kant does not forbid happiness:** A careful reader may notice that in the example above one of the selfish person's intended consequences is to make himself happy, and so it might seem to be that intended consequences do matter. One might think Kant is claiming that if one of my intentions is to make

myself happy, that my action is not worthy. This is a mistake. The consequence of making myself happy is a good consequence, even according to Kant. Kant clearly thinks that people being happy is a good thing. There is nothing wrong with doing something with an intended consequence of making yourself happy, that is not selfishness. You can get moral worth doing things that you enjoy, but the reason you are doing them cannot be that you enjoy them, the reason must be that they are required by duty. Also, there is a tendency to think that Kant says it is always wrong to do something that just causes your own happiness, like buying an ice cream cone. This is not the case. Kant thinks that you ought to do things to make yourself happy as long as you make sure that they are not immoral (i.e., contrary to duty), and that you would refrain from doing them if they were immoral. Getting ice cream is not immoral, and so you can go ahead and do it. Doing it will not make you a morally worthy person, but it won't make you a bad person either. Many actions which are permissible but not required by duty are neutral in this way.

According to Kant a good person is someone who always does their duty because it is their duty. It is fine if they enjoy doing it, but it must be the case that they would do it even if they did not enjoy it. The overall theme is that to be a good person you must be good for goodness sake.

### **Problem of Kant's Theory**

Kant's view is that lying is always wrong. His argument for this is summarized by James Rachels as follows:

- (1) We should do only those actions that conform to rules that we could will be adopted universally.
- (2) If we were to lie, we would be following the rule "It is permissible to lie."
- (3) This rule could not be adopted universally, because it would be self-defeating: people would stop believing one another, and then it would do no good to lie.
- (4) Therefore, we should not lie.

The problem with this argument is that we can lie without simply following the rule "It is permissible to lie." Instead, we might be following a rule that pertains only to specific circumstances, like "It is permissible to lie when doing so

will save a life.” This rule can be made a universal law without contradiction. After all, it is not as though people would stop believing each other simply because it is known that people lie when doing so will save lives. For one thing, that situation rarely comes up—people could still be telling the truth almost all of the time. Even the taking of human life could be justified under certain circumstances. Take self-defense, for example. There appears to be nothing problematic with the rule “It is permissible to kill when doing so is the only available means of defense against an attacker”.

It is not necessary to interpret Kant’s theory as prohibiting lying in all circumstances (as Kant did). Maxims (and the universal laws that result from them) can be specified in a way that reflects all of the relevant features of the situation. Consider the case of the Inquiring Murderer (as described in the text). Suppose that you are in that situation and you lie to the murderer. Instead of understanding the universalized maxim as “Everyone Always lies” we can understand it as “Everyone always lies in order to protect innocents from stalkers”. This maxim seems to pass the test of the categorical imperative. Unfortunately, complicated maxims make Kant’s theory becomes more difficult to understand and apply.

Procedure for determining whether a proposed action violates **Categorical Imperatives** -

**(1) Formulate the maxim:**

I am to do x in circumstances y in order to bring about z.

Example:

*I am to lie on a loan application when I am in severe financial difficulty and there is no other way to obtain funds, in order to ease the strain on my finances.*

**(2) Generalize the maxim into a law of nature:**

Everyone always does x in circumstances y in order to bring about z.

*Everyone always lies on a loan application when he is in severe financial difficulty and there is no other way to obtain funds, in order to ease the strain on his finances.*



**(3) Figure out the *perturbed social world (PSW)*, that is, what the world would be like if this law of nature were added to existing laws of nature and things had a chance to reach equilibrium.** Note: assume that after the adjustment to equilibrium the new law is *common knowledge* -- everyone knows that it is true, everyone knows that everyone knows, etc.

## **BUTLER'S VIEW OF CONSCIENCE**

Butler was influenced by both the rational intuitionists and the 'moral sense' school, and his account of the moral faculty has the appearance of a compromise, or an attempt at reconciliation, between their respective views. He speaks of the moral faculty as 'our moral understanding and moral sense'. He argues that the existence of moral terms like 'right' and 'wrong' in all languages, and their universal use to distinguish, for instance, between injury and just punishment, presuppose 'a moral faculty; whether called conscience, moral reason, moral sense, or divine reason; whether considered as a sentiment of the understanding, or as a perception of the heart; or, which seems the truth, as including both'. This is how he defines conscience: '... there is a superior principle of reflection or conscience in every man, which distinguishes between the internal principles of his heart, as well as his external actions; which passes judgment upon himself and them; pronounces determinately some actions to be in themselves just, right, good; others to be in themselves evil, wrong, unjust; which, without being consulted, without being advised with, magisterially exerts itself, and approves or condemns him, the doer of them accordingly . Conscience is a principle of reflection, according to Butler, in the sense that by means of it we make the intentions, actions, and characters of ourselves and others objects of thought.ss Butler shared the view of other intuitionists that the moral properties which conscience discerns are logically distinct from all others. 'Everything is what it is, and not another thing. The goodness or badness of actions does not arise from hence, that the epithet, interested or disinterested, may be applied to them, any more than that any other ... epithet ... may or not ... but from their being what they are . Butler also believed conscience capable of what Hutcheson called 'election', i.e. motivation or W. D. Hudson, *Ethical Intuitionism* W. D. Hudson 1967 excitement to action; he spoke

of its 'strength' or 'influence', compared with other forms of motivation, and of its 'restraining' men from evil and 'leading' them to do good . He conceived of human nature as a system, economy, or constitution. In describing it, he said, regard must be paid, not only to its parts, but to the relations in which they stand, the latter being determined by the use or end for which man exists. The elements of human nature are: (1) A number of particular passions, appetites or affections. Each is a direct simple tendency or movement towards a particular external object, or objects, without distinction of means by which they are to be obtained, Hunger, sexual desire, and the desire for esteem are examples. All tend to promote both public and private good, though some more immediately the one than the other. (2) Two general principles, benevolence and self-love, from which actions proceed. These are distinct from the passions, but they may guide effort to gratify the latter. Self-love, for example, 'may put us upon making use of the proper methods of obtaining' the pleasure of gratified hunger, but the feeling itself is 'no more self-love than . anything in the world'. Benevolence, of course, tends most directly to public, self-love to private, good; yet the two principles are so 'perfectly coincident' that benevolence is a necessary condition of the fullest self-satisfaction and self-love is the chief security of our right behaviour towards society. (3) Conscience. Butler thought that 'it cannot possibly be denied' that there is this principle of reflection in human nature. Any man who did two actions, one helping an innocent person in distress, the other harming a friend with no justification whatever, and then coolly reflected upon them, would inevitably approve of the former and disapprove of the latter. To deny that he would is 'too glaring a falsity to need being confuted'. We shall return to the subject of the authority of conscience, but if the latter is, as Butler affirmed, a faculty 'in kind and in nature supreme over all others, and which bears its own authority of being so', then the end of, and the correct relationship between the elements within, human nature, referred to at the beginning of this paragraph, are self-evident. The end is virtue. The correct relationship is that which conscience prescribes.