

Ethical Theories/Approaches

Several ethical theories have been developed over different times, each of them stressing certain ethical principles or features. Each stresses a view and many a times, we find that these theories converge and reinforce the ethics, in deciding upon the actions and justifying the results

1. Utilitarian Theory

The term Utilitarianism was conceived in the 19th century by **Jeremy Bentham** and **John Stuart Mill** to help legislators determine which laws were morally best. They suggested that the standard of right conduct is maximization of good consequences. Good consequences mean either 'utilities' or the 'balance of good over evil'. This approach weighs the costs and benefits. Right actions are the ones that produce the greatest satisfaction of the preferences of the affected persons. In analyzing an issue in this approach, we have to:

- (a) Identify the various courses of action available to us.
- (b) Ask who will be affected by each action and what benefits or harms will be derived from each.
- (c) Choose the action that will produce the greatest benefits and the least harm. The ethical action is the one that provides the greatest good for the greatest number.

The ACT UTILITARIAN theory proposed by **J.S. Mill** (1806-73) focuses on actions, rather than on general rules. An action is right, if it generates the most overall good for the most people involved. The RULE UTILITARIAN theory, developed by **Richard**

Brandt (1910-97), stressed on the rules, such as 'do not steal', 'do no harm others', 'do not bribe', as of primary importance. He suggested that individual actions are right when they are required by set of rules which maximizes the public good.

The act utilitarian theory permitted a few immoral actions. Hence, there was need to develop rule *utilitarian theory* to establish morality and justice, in the transactions. For example, stealing an old computer from the employer will benefit the employee more than the loss to the employer. As per Act, utilitarian this action is right. But rule utilitarian observes this as wrong, because the employee should act as 'faithful agent or trustee of the employees'. In another example, some undisciplined engineers are terminated with the blame for the mistakes they have not committed.

C.W.D. Ross,

the British philosopher introduced the term *prima facie duties*, which means duties might have justified exceptions. In fact, most duties are *prima facie* ones; some may have obligatory or permissible exceptions. Ross assumed that the *prima facie* duties are intuitively obvious (self-evident), while fixing priorities among duties. He noted that the principles such as 'Do not kill' and 'protect innocent life' involve high respect for persons than other principles such as, 'Do not lie' (less harmful). This theory is criticized on the fact, that the intuitions do not provide sufficient guideline for moral duty. He has listed various aspects of Duty Ethics that reflect our moral convictions, namely:

1. Fidelity : duty to keep promises.
2. Reparation : duty to compensate others when we harm them.
3. Gratitude : duty to thank those who help us.
4. Justice : duty to recognize merit.
5. Beneficence : duty to recognize inequality and improve the condition of others.
6. Self-improvement : duty to improve virtue and intelligence.
7. Non-maleficence : duty not to injure others.

Rights Theory

Rights are entitlement to act or to have another individual act in a certain way. Minimally, rights serve as a protective barrier, shielding individuals from unjustified infringement of their moral agency by others. For every right, we have a corresponding duty of noninterference.

A. The RIGHTS approach to ethics has its roots in the 18th century philosopher **Immanuel Kant**, who focused on the individual's right to choose for oneself. According him, what makes human beings different from mere things is, that people have dignity based on their ability to choose freely what they will do with their lives, and they have a fundamental moral right to have these choices respected. People are not objects to be manipulated; it is a violation of human dignity to use people in ways they do not freely choose. Other rights he advocated are:

1. *The right to access the truth:* We have a right to be told the truth and to be informed about matters that significantly affect our choices.
2. *The right of privacy:* We have the right to do, believe, and say whatever we choose in our personal lives so long as we do not violate the rights of others.

3. *The right not to be injured*: We have the right not to be harmed or injured unless we freely and knowingly do something to deserve punishment or we freely and knowingly choose to risk such injuries.

4. *The right to what is agreed*: We have a right to what has been promised by those with whom we have freely entered into a contract or agreement.

B. In deciding whether an action is moral or immoral, we must ask, does the action respect the moral rights of everyone? Actions are wrong to the extent that they violate the rights of individuals; the more serious is the violation, the more wrongful is the action. The RIGHTS theory as promoted by **John Locke** states that the actions are right, if they respect human rights of every one affected. He proposed the three basic human rights, namely *life, liberty, and property*. His views were reflected in the modern American society, when Jefferson declared the basic rights as life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

C. As per **A.I. Melden's** theory based on rights, nature mandates that we should not harm others' life, health, liberty or property. Melden allowed welfare rights also for living a decent human life. He highlighted that the rights should be based on the social welfare system.

D. *Human rights*: Human rights are explained in two forms, namely liberty rights and welfare rights. Liberty rights are rights to exercise one's liberty and stresses duties on other people not to interfere with one's freedom. The four features of liberty rights (also called *moral rights*), which lay the base for Government Administration, are:

1. Rights are natural in so far as they are not invented or created by government.
2. They are universal, as they do not change from country to country.
3. They are equal since the rights are the same for all people, irrespective of caste, race, creed or sex.
4. They are inalienable i.e., one cannot hand over his rights to another person such as selling oneself to slavery.

Welfare Rights are the rights to benefit the needy for a decent human life, when one can not earn those benefits and when those benefits are available in the society.

SELF-CONTROL

It is a virtue of maintaining personal discipline. It means a strong will and motivation and avoidance of fear, hatred, lack of efforts, temptation, self-deception, and emotional response. It encompasses courage and good judgment also. Self-respect promotes self-control.

SELF-INTEREST

Self-interest is being good and acceptable to oneself. It is pursuing what is good for oneself. It is very ethical to possess self-interest. As per utilitarian theory, this interest should provide for the respect of others also. Duty ethics recognizes this aspect as duties to ourselves. Then only one can help others. Right ethicist stresses our rights to pursue our own good. Virtue ethics also accepts the importance of self-respect as link to social practices.

In Ethical Egoism, the self is conceived in a highly individualistic manner. It says that every one of us should always and only promote one's own interest. The ethical egoists do not accept the well being of the community or caring for others. However this self interest should not degenerate into egoism or selfishness, i.e., maximizing only own good in the pursuit of self-interest. The ethical egoists hold that the society benefits to maximum when (a) the individuals pursue their personal good and (b) the individual organizations pursue maximum profit in a competitive enterprise. This is claimed to improve the economy of the country as a whole, besides the individuals. In such pursuits, both individuals and organizations should realize that independence is not the only important value. We are also interdependent, as much as independent. Each of us is vulnerable in the society. Self-respect includes recognition of our vulnerabilities and interdependencies. Hence, it is compatible with caring for ourselves as well as others. Self-interest is necessary initially to begin with. But it should be one of the prime motives for action; the other motive is to show concern for others, in the family as well as society. One's self-interest should not harm others. The principles of 'Live and let (others) live', and 'reasonably fair competition' are recommended to professionals by the ethicists.

CUSTOMS

Ethical Pluralism:

Various cultures in our pluralistic society lead to tolerance for various customs, beliefs, and outlooks. Accordingly ethical pluralism also exists. Although many moral attitudes appear to be reasonable, the rational and morally concerned people can not fully accept any one of the moral perspectives. There are many varied moral values, which allow variation in the understanding and application of values by the individuals or groups in their everyday transactions. It means that even reasonable people will not agree on all moral issues and professional ethics.

Ethical Relativism: According to this principle, actions are considered morally right when approved by law or custom, and wrong when they violate the laws or customs. The deciding factor is the law or the customs of the society. Should we accept the principle of relativism or not? A few reasons to accept this are explained in the following paragraphs:

1. Laws appear to be objective ways for judging values. The laws and customs tend to be definite, clear and real, but not always. Further moral reasons allow objective criticism of laws, as being morally lacking. For example, the Apartheid laws of South Africa violated the human rights of the native Africans. No legal protection was available for native citizens for a long time. Now, of course, these laws have been repealed.
2. Ethical relativism assumes that the values are subjective at the cultural level. Moral standards also vary from culture to culture. The objectivity is supported by the existing laws of that society. The relative morality accepted, supports the virtue of tolerance of differences among societies. This argument is also not fully acceptable. As per ethical relativism, the actions and laws of the Nazis and Hitler who vowed on Anti-Semitism and killed several million Jews would be accepted as right.
3. Moral relationalism or moral contextualism: According to this, the moral judgments must be made in relation to certain factors, which may vary from case to case. The morally important factors for making judgments include the customs and laws. The virtue ethicists hold that the practical wisdom should prevail upon assessing the facts and in the judgment.

RELIGION

Religions have played major roles in shaping moral views and moral values, over geographical regions. Christianity has influenced the Western countries, Islam in the Middle-East countries, Buddhism and Hinduism in Asia, and Confucianism in China. Further, there is a strong psychological link between the moral and religious beliefs of people following various religions and faiths. Religions support moral responsibility. They have set high moral standards. Faith in the religions provides trust and this trust inspires people to be moral. The religions insist on tolerance and moral concern for others. Many professionals who possess religious beliefs are motivated to be morally responsible.

DIVINE COMMAND ETHICS

As per this principle, the right action is defined by the commands by God. It implies that to be moral, a person should believe in God and an action is right only if it is commanded by God. There are some difficulties in this approach, namely, (a) whether God exists or not is not clear. (b) How to know what are the God's commands? and (c) How to verify the genuineness of the commands? Further, religions such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity accept the existence of God. But Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism adopt only faith in a right path and do not believe in God.

Socrates was said to have argued that God, an entity which is responsible, morally good, and beyond fear or favor, would not command murder, rape, torture, immoral activities, and even mass suicide. Many such crimes were committed in the name of God then and continue even now in different parts of the world. Some Western leaders had claimed that God had commanded them to invade against the Middle-East countries. If anyone claims to have obtained commands from God to kill people merciless, then we have to conclude that the person is not religious but insane.

2.16 SELF-RESPECT

It is defined as valuing oneself in morally suitable ways. Self-respect includes (a) recognition, which means respect to others, their ideas, decisions, ability, and rights and (b) appraisal, which means properly valuing ourselves as to how well we face moral standards and our personal commitments (aims). An intensive but balanced feeling of self-respect is sense of honor. This includes intense agony and guilt for wrong doings. Self-control is a virtue of maintaining personal discipline (self-regulation).