

## **THE ROLE OF THE PHILOSOPHER IN ETHICS**

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Ethics deal with the evaluation of human conduct, actions, intentions, motives, traits of character, goals etc. The role of ethical judgment is not conceived as making theoretical statements, but as providing action guiding principles, giving advice and exhortations to virtue and so on. Evaluation of activities and things connected with the life of human beings can be done from many different points of view, and among these, the ethical point of view occupies a very important place. In so far as something is a willful human action or a product of human willful intervention, it can be ethically evaluated, and in that connection, the question whether it is right or wrong, good or bad, whether it ought to be or ought not to be, is just or unjust can be raised. Although the language used in ethics takes the linguistic form of indicatives used in descriptive discourse, philosophers who focus on its logical features consider it to be evaluative and prescriptive.

When we look for the recognition of ethics of any community, we look for the way in which it engages in commendation or condemnation, and prescription or proscription of types of action or patterns of conduct in terms of accepted norms, rules or codes of conduct. Those who engage in this first order activity may be the elders, the teachers, and others in the social hierarchy who uphold and transmit the conventionally accepted morality and ethics of the community. There are different approaches to this first order activity out of which, the philosophical is one of the most significant. The philosophical approach to ethics may be considered as a second order activity, because it arises out of critical reflection on the first order activity of making ethical judgments.

Three kinds of thinking can be distinguished relating to ethics:

1. Descriptive empirical inquiry, historical or scientific, such as what is done by anthropologists, sociologists, historians and psychologists. The attempt here is not to make any moral judgments but to study the phenomena of morality. These studies may show us the kind of value

judgments that people in different communities make and why their value system is such. No particular ethical commitment is expected from someone who approaches ethics from this standpoint. The methods followed here are expected to be in conformity with the empirical methods of the social scientist.

2. Normative thinking involving the laying down of moral principles and rules and attempting to justify them by giving acceptable reasons. With regard to the activity of commendation and condemnation, prescription and proscription referred to above, disagreement can and does occur within the same community as well as across communities that subscribe to different cultural traditions. A course of action one person or a group of persons commends, may be condemned by another person or a group of persons. The traditionally accepted ethical norms of a community may be questioned due to critical reflection on them within the given cultural tradition itself or due to the influence of alternative norms that people become aware of through interaction with other cultures. Any rational human being in such circumstances is inclined to consider the question of the validity and invalidity of the commendatory or condemnatory and prescriptive or proscriptive judgments that people make. This can be said to be the starting point of philosophical ethics. Accordingly, a familiar philosophical approach to ethics called normative ethics developed in the history of philosophy. Normative ethics attempts to formulate and defend basic principles and virtues governing moral life. It seeks to present general guiding principles in terms of which particular actions could be evaluated or rules governing types of action could be formulated. Such principles are usually derived from a rationally defended ethical theory. Normative ethics in this sense moves from the uncritical and conventional activity of subscribing to existing ethical codes and practices, to the critical activity of rationally defending a general ethical theory and ethical principles in terms of which our ethical norms and practices could be determined. Normative ethics seeks to establish a rationally defensible standard or a fundamental major premise in terms of which ethical decisions could be arrived at in particular ethical situations.

3. Analytical, critical or meta-ethical thinking differs from both (1) and (2) since its main concern is with logical, epistemological or semantic questions. It raises questions about the meaning of ethical terms, analyzes ethical concepts and examines the logical structure of moral judgments and moral arguments. It is a second-order activity of clarifying from a logical point of view the nature of moral discourse, without in any way directly participating in it.

Many recent moral philosophers consider only the third variety as concerned with moral philosophy, but some consider both the second and the third as falling within the purview of the philosopher. Discussion of ethical issues along the lines mentioned under the second approach eventually draws us into the discussion of problems connected with the third approach. Due to this reason, the two latter approaches that belong to the sphere of philosophy are interconnected. However, a philosopher who is exclusively engaged in the discussion of meta-ethical issues may not be interested in establishing any particular moral system that is considered to be true and valid, whereas it is the case with someone engaged in normative ethical inquiry.

Moral philosophy arises when we begin to question traditional rules and adopt a critical approach towards an existing morality. The second and the third modes of thinking about morality are a consequence of taking such an approach. The first belongs entirely to empirical science.

Philosophical thinking about normative ethics has given rise to two main philosophical positions called (1) Teleological theory of ethics and (2) Deontological theory of ethics. The two main forms of a teleological theory of ethics are (1) Ethical egoism and (2) Utilitarianism or ethical universalism.

A teleological ethical theory maintains that the basic or ultimate criterion or standard of what is morally right, wrong, obligatory etc. is the non-moral value that is brought into being. The question of ethical value is to be answered by first considering what is good as an end in itself or what the ultimate good is. Questions regarding what is ethically good are to be resolved by answering questions about the comparative balance of good over evil produced in pursuing alternative courses of action. There is a difference between judgments of moral value and judgments of non-moral value. Usually, judgments of moral value are made about persons, their

character traits, conduct, actions, intentions etc. from a moral point of view. Judgments of non-moral value are made of all kinds of things such as motorcars, pictures, sunsets and furniture. The criteria for determining the non-moral value of each of these classes of things may be different in each case. The question that is considered to be relevant for ethical judgments in a teleological system of ethics is, 'What is ultimately good in a non-moral sense?' Hedonistic theories of good propose that happiness or pleasure is the ultimate good in the non-moral sense. Hedonism is a monistic theory regarding what is ultimately good. There are other philosophers who believe that things other than happiness or pleasure can be intrinsically good or good as ends, for instance, knowledge, freedom, health and so on. G. E. Moore, a British moral philosopher who belonged to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is known in the history of moral philosophy as a person who held the latter view and hence, was called an ideal utilitarian. Ethical egoism as a teleological theory holds that one ought to always do what will promote one's own greatest good. This view is sometimes supported by a psychological thesis that one cannot and does not do anything other than what is in one's own interest. Such a theory may be called psychological egoism. It has been rejected by moral philosophers like Bishop Butler and David Hume who have drawn attention to the fact that human beings are endowed with a sentiment of sympathy, which is an important determinant of the moral life. Utilitarianism or Ethical universalism attempts to overcome the objections against egoistic ethics by taking the position that an act is right if it promotes the greatest good of the greatest number.

There are two kinds of utilitarian ethical theory : (1) Act Utilitarianism and (2) Rule Utilitarianism. According to Act-utilitarianism one has to determine what is right by considering which of the actions open to him/her, in the particular situation in which he/she is contemplating on making a moral decision, is likely to produce the greatest balance of good over evil in the universe. Rule-utilitarianism proposes that in choosing our actions, we should depend upon the rule that has the greatest utility. Frankena speaks of another form of utilitarianism called 'general utilitarianism' according to which when contemplating on the choice of action which goes against an established general rule that is supposed to be productive of the greatest good in general, we should ask the question 'what if everyone violated it?'

Deontological ethical theories deny what teleological theories affirm. According to deontological theories, actions can be right and wrong irrespective of their consequences. Having good consequences is not the only characteristic that

makes an action right. There could be other characteristics such as fidelity, truthfulness, and justice that make actions right. The emphasis in deontological theories is on doing what is right because it is right, or doing one's duty for the sake of doing one's duty without concern for its consequences.

Deontological theories also fall into two categories like utilitarian theories, namely, (1) Act Deontological Theories and (2) Rule Deontological theories. According to Act-deontological theory one has to decide in each particular situation what is right to do. There are no general rules that can apply to all situations. According to Rule-deontological theory there is one or a number of basic rules that can be applied as a criterion of right action. One classic example of a monistic Rule-deontological theory from the history of ethics is one that was held by Immanuel Kant. He proposed the following as a singular moral rule that can be universally applied to determine all moral decisions: "Act only on that maxim which you can will to become a universal law". Kant believed that this rule is derived from practical reason. According to Kant reasoning in morality falls outside the sphere of theoretical reason, but falls within the sphere of practical reason. He believed that there is a difference between ethical principles and laws of nature. Based on this difference Kant distinguished two realms of knowledge: knowledge in the natural sciences and knowledge in ethics. He interpreted moral judgments as consisting of imperatives, and argued that the moral imperative should be distinguished from the hypothetical imperative which takes a conditional form. He distinguished between three types of imperatives, the imperatives of 'rules of skill', the imperatives of 'prudential counsels' as to how to achieve happiness and the imperatives involving 'moral duties'. The moral imperative cannot be formulated according to a means-end relationship, but only in terms of a categorical imperative. Kant's criterion of universalizability expresses what is contained in the great religions as the Golden Rule criterion of morality.

In the case of utilitarian theories of ethics, it seems possible to determine ethical issues by observing the consequences of action provided that happiness or pleasure can be measured, and what course of action maximizes happiness or pleasure can be settled on the basis of empirical evidence. Some critics of it argue, however, that what constitutes happiness also involves an evaluation, making the process of determining the moral value of a course of action according to the proposed theory circular. Deontological theories are also required to explain the grounds on which a person's moral duty or what is right could be determined by

considering the contemplated action itself without any reference to anything extraneous to it. Some deontologists may resort to some kind of commandment theory or to the authority of revelation, while others may seek to establish it on a kind of rational or non-rational intuition. Kant's solution, for instance, proposed rational intuition while intuitionist philosophers like H.A. Prichard and W.D. Ross proposed a kind of non-rational intuition. Moral philosophers have argued that the proposed categorical imperative of Kant had succeeded in identifying only a necessary condition for logically excluding morally unacceptable principles, but not a logically sufficient condition for doing so. The problem of having to follow any specific rule of action without exception has also been seen as an objection to Kant's position. The proposed non-rational intuition of Prichard and Ross provides no plausible solution to the problem of ethical disagreement arising due to conflict of intuitions.

A number of meta-ethical theories have also been proposed in the history of moral philosophy. The most well known among these are:

1. Intuitionism
2. Emotivism
3. Prescriptivism

Intuitionism is the thesis that we become intuitively aware of what is morally right and wrong. There are ethical facts to be known, but they are not facts that can be known by means of empirical observation. According to emotivism, ethical language has to be distinguished from descriptive language. In making ethical utterances what we essentially do is evince our attitude towards courses of action and attempt to evoke the same attitudes towards them in our hearers. According to prescriptivism, ethical judgments can be seen as based on universalizable prescriptions. All three theories of meta-ethics proposed are meant to be criticisms of what is considered as naturalism in ethics. However, unlike the proposed meta-ethical theories meant to counter what is conceived as naturalism, no philosopher has proposed naturalism as a separate ethical theory. Philosophers like G.E. Moore associated utilitarianism with naturalism. Meta-ethical philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century considered as naturalist, any attempt to analyze the logic of ethical utterances in terms of empirical utterances and reduce them to a sub class of empirical statements.

Meta-ethical theory has also resulted in another distinction called 'ethical cognitivism' and 'ethical non-cognitivism'. Emotivism and Prescriptivism are associated with a non-cognitivist position in ethics. Non-cognitivism implies that there is no genuine knowledge in ethics, which is comparable to the knowledge in the empirical or formal sciences. Intuitionism is associated with a cognitivist position in ethics. Ethical cognitivism implies that we can have moral knowledge, and that ethical propositions can be true or false. Other than intuitionism, some of the naturalist theories can also be classed among cognitivist theories. Some philosophers have proposed theories that may be described as neo-naturalist, contending that 'the moral point of view' sets logical limits to what may be considered as evidence in favor of a moral judgment. Considerations of wellbeing, benefit, good, ill, harm etc. cannot be ignored in adducing evidence in favor of a moral judgment. One cannot legitimately claim that logically any evidence can be adduced in favor of a moral judgment because of their evaluative character.

In relation to the problem of moral knowledge it is also possible to raise the question whether moral judgments belong to the class of objective, subjective or relativistic judgments. Intuitionism and some forms of naturalism imply that ethical judgments are objective. Emotivism, prescriptivism and some forms of naturalism imply that they belong to the class of subjective judgments. If ethical judgments are subjective there cannot be any genuine ethical disagreement. Ethical disagreement is explainable merely as incompatibility of attitudes, tastes, and preferences. A logical objection raised against any subjective theory of ethics which attempts to analyze the meaning of 'Action A is morally good' in terms of a reference to subjective feeling such as 'I like action A' is that, according to this analysis, there would be no genuine contradiction between two persons who disagree regarding an ethical judgment. Person X who says 'Action A is good' is merely saying 'I like action A' and person Y who says 'Action A is bad' is merely saying 'I do not like action A'. As a matter of psychological fact, both statements could be true. A further consideration is that a subjective analysis would logically preclude one from saying in an ethical situation 'I like action A, but it is morally bad' or 'I do not like action A, but it is morally good'. But these are what we strongly believe to be meaningful utterances in most ethical situations.

In the history of philosophical ethics, intense debates have occurred among the advocates of these different philosophical theories although the contentious issues have not been conclusively settled. Yet, the different theories proposed

have thrown much light on the activity of making ethical judgments. Some philosophers like Frankena have attempted to arrive at a synthesis of the two major normative ethical theories, as the most rational and satisfactory basis for moral decision-making. In applied ethics attempts have been made to derive principles of action from both types of ethical theory. Others have found that both traditional forms of normative theory have to be transcended and a new approach has to be taken in the moral life. They emphasize the importance of establishing what human virtues are, and draw attention to the importance of the identification and cultivation of wholesome traits of character. This approach is referred to as virtue ethics.

The relevance of meta-ethical questions to philosophical inquiry into ethics has also been recognized, although no conclusive meta-ethical theory appears to have been established. Meta-ethical analysis has brought about a great deal of clarity to ethical discourse, and it is evident that in the attempt to answer questions of normative ethics, one cannot avoid the consideration of meta-ethical issues. A critical examination of the meta-ethical theories proposed shows that no single theory can stand on its own. Philosophy has however contributed to instill rationality and critical spirit into the moral life, at least amongst those who believe that human beings need to be rational in whatever they do, to be delivered from arbitrariness. The nature of moral disagreement and its practical consequences are such that unless rationality governs moral life, mankind is most likely to suffer extremely undesirable consequences.

## References

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