

E-CONTENT PREPARED BY

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Philosophy

Name of Course: Western Ethics

Topic of the E-Content

Nature and Scope of Ethics

E-Content

Quadrant 1: Text

The English word 'Ethics' is derived from the Greek word 'Ethica' which stands for custom or habit. Ethics is also known as Moral Philosophy. The subject matter of Ethics revolves round human conduct. Ethics always deals with conscious/voluntary human conduct.

Definition of Ethics as a Normative Science

William Lille defines 'Ethics' as, ".....as the normative science of the conduct of human beings living in societies-a science that judges this conduct to be right or wrong, to be good or bad or in some similar way". So this definition of Lille puts forward certain important points as follows;

1. Ethics is a Normative Science
2. Ethics deals with or evaluates human conduct
3. Ethics evaluates conduct of man living in organized/protected/civil societies
4. Ethics judges a conduct as right or wrong, to be good or bad.

Now the most important issue of all which Lille's definition points out is that Ethics is a science. We all know that Science is a systematic study of a subject matter which is definitely different from the unorganized data or popular views or of common opinion mainly not supported by reason. Science actually provides us a comprehensive knowledge of a subject with simpler and clearer perception of the same. Moreover there may be for example plant science or say science of the human mind and equally there may be a science of human conduct.

Ethics as a Normative Science deals with Voluntary Human Conduct

The science of Human conduct which we aspire to call as Ethics differs from a Positive science. Positive science is in no position to judge its objects as. Normative science not only judges its objects based on the standards that they describe but also questions on the validity of such standards. In Ethics we not only question on the standard on which a human conduct is judged as good or bad but also question on the grounds that such rules or standards must be observed. More over human conducts are voluntary when a person could have acted in a different way if he had so decided. For example; the blinking of an eye; here we must remember that a man could have refrained from doing so or changed the happening of such an action; even if it might seem that there is no conscious willingness behind such action. The argument in favor may be such that a person could have blinked his eyes differently and hence controlled it or even that he might have restricted it consciously and hence it is a voluntary action or a voluntary human conduct with which Ethics deals. The question that is important of Ethics then is that if an action may be deliberately prevented then that action may be judged as right or wrong and hence fall as a subject matter of Ethics. Ethics also considers inward actions like motives and desires as voluntary human conduct.

Ethics deals with conduct of Human beings living in Society

Ethics deals with human conduct which not only affects the doer but also his fellow beings living in the society and this definitely excludes actions performed by lower animals. Social relations and social institutions are the ones which go in the making of a human being. We call ourselves as social animals willing to live in groups and clusters and exchange advantages or even share discomforts. We also engage in deciding and judging human actions as a part of our culture and civilization. Hence, making ethical judgment a part of our daily practice and living standards.

Ethics impose value on human voluntary conduct

In Ethics we judge a conduct as morally good not only because it is a favorable human conduct but because we must be aware of the value that the conduct bears in respect of the individual concerned as well as in respect of the society. A human conduct is thus good or has a value if it is worthy of arousing favorable attitude or ought to arouse favorable attitude in the doer of an action in connection with the performance/enactment of it. This is how we may impose value to an action. Moreover we may also consider imposing values in terms of the consequences that an action may produce. The words 'right' and 'wrong' may be used in case of action that has a certain fittingness in reference to the circumstance in which they are performed. This fittingness to the circumstance may be in the aesthetic sense. An action may also be called 'right' if it be in some way obligatory on the part of the doer. There is certainly a difference between an action which may be simply right to do and an action which is obligatory on the part of the doer. The action is right since it is obligatory when the option of not performing it or refraining to perform it is there with the doer; if he so decides. There are system of studies like, Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology which all deals with human conduct but Ethics is definitely different in dealing with human conduct in trying to lay the foundation of certain norms or standards which would judge an action to be right or wrong or good or bad. This must be noted by all that Ethics actually does not take under consideration what the doer thinks when he calls an action to be good or bad; instead Ethics deals with the question on what the doer ought to consider in calling an action good or bad. In other words, Ethics investigates into the true meaning or the only meaning in which the words 'good' or 'bad' must be used in terms of an action. The discovery of such standards is the prime task of a normative science like Ethics. So there may be a positive science of morals describing men's moral standards while there is also the normative science of Ethics questioning the validity of such moral standards. Again there may be Applied Ethics, applying the moral standards to valid concrete cases and the Practical Ethics having the definite aim of improving human conduct.

What then is the function of a Moralist?

The Moralist is a social being himself so he may not be in a position of discovering moral standards. It is absolutely not the case that the standards discovered by the moralist are accepted by all men but it is a fact that the moralist upholds those standards which men ought to follow. The common man may not actually follow such moral standards but the question of actually abiding by the moral standards is not addressed by the moralist. There is the point of the subject matter of Ethics which the moralist keeps in mind. He certainly hence tries to equip the intuition of the common man with such moral standards

which may be the case are the only ones to be followed or rather ought to be followed in respect of a certain circumstance. A common man has his experience which is perhaps the best source of moral standards and the best reason he has why such moral standards needs to be followed in the society. The moralist only makes use of such experience which he himself is subject to and rationalize over the fact that if such moral standards be followed then it may be cited in future as the criterion of acceptability or denial of an action. So the Moralist in a way develops the horizon of a common man in considering moral standards as the means to attain a good living standard and thereby follow a good life.

References:

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3. J. L .Mackie: *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin Books, New York, 1977