



**APPLIED ETHICS**

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**School of Interdisciplinary and Trans-Disciplinary Studies (SOITS)**  
**Indira Gandhi National Open University**  
**New Delhi**

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## COURSE INTRODUCTION

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Applied Ethics is a 6 credit Interdisciplinary course.

Applied ethics is a philosophical enquiry into the process of making ethical judgements in many of the specialised provinces of human endeavour that represent uniqueness, complexity, at times novelty and often dilemmas that rarely mark their presence in normal walks of life. Intent of such an enquiry is to understand and, if needed, develop theoretical frameworks and general principles that can form the foundation of ethical judgements in such domains of human enterprise.

Ethical judgement, at its core, concerns with demarcating what constitutes right or good or morally permissible. Alternatively stated, it essentially is an attempt to determine the interests that ought to be harboured and the acts and behaviours that ought to be exhibited to pursue such interests. It is, therefore, a question of value judgement where some interest, acts and behaviours are accorded precedence over the other, but an equally significant concern, if not more, is to understand *how* such value judgements are made.

It wouldn't be uncommon to find more than one way to arrive at such judgements. Lying or stealing in general, for instance, is considered an unacceptable practise, but the basis for arriving at such a conclusion may differ from people to people across societies. Does it imply that all such modes of judgements assume equal legitimacy, or should there be some specific mode that needs to be accorded precedence over others? For instance, should we rely on our intuitions or basal urges to guide our judgement, or should we surrender to our socio-cultural and religious conditioning to assign values to our choices, or should we rely on some form of final authority to make that judgement for us. It may so happen that relying on such modes, often morally correct judgements are arrived at, but arriving at an appropriate end may not be sufficient to consider any of such modes to be a reliable tool of ethical judgement, for their unreliability quickly unfolds the moment one is presented with situations that are relatively complex. The same practices of lying and stealing, for instance, in different contexts, may present complexities that may not afford such an easy judgement. Lying or stealing *to save lives*, for example, does put us in a relatively more difficult position to make a judgement. It is not implied here that in complex contexts as the one stated above, such modes are necessarily bound to fail in pointing to the appropriate moral option. It only means there is no dearth of burgeoning complexity where such modes eventually crumble. The question, it must be recognised, is also not of simplicity or complexity in making such judgements. Instead, it is about developing or the need for developing a sound basis to arrive at such judgements regardless of the simplicity or complexity of the scenario.

An alternative, therefore, is to rely on our rational faculties and try to come up with general principles that can be relied upon to make such judgements, an option that *Ethics*, a subdomain of philosophy, exercises. In doing so, it relies on argumentation as the instrument of justification, enough scepticism to probe the edifice of any belief and an uncompromising resolve to walk the tight ropes of logic. Applied ethics does the same in the context of some of the specialised domains of human endeavour that often involve practises that represent a departure from the regular we experience and participate in, yet such practises have significant ethical implications that merit a philosophical scrutiny. The uniqueness, novelties and dilemmas from such provinces

often hold the potential to reshape the existing understanding of concepts, principles, and theoretical frameworks within the field of ethics.

This course is an attempt to introduce some of the key ethical issues, debates and dilemmas that emerge from such provinces and highlights some of the attempts to develop theoretical framework and general principles to address them. Some of these specialised provinces that deserve particular attention and therefore have been accorded the same in the course are '*bio-ethics*', '*environmental ethics*', '*ethics and technology*', '*media and cyber ethics*', '*medical ethics*' and '*business ethics*'. The course, in addition to the forgoing general treatment of the domains, separately discusses some of the key ethical issues and the associated dilemmas that hold special significance in some of the mentioned domains such as, '*abortion*', '*reproductive rights*' and '*animal rights*'. Some issues that can't be pinned down to any of the stated domains yet raise some significant ethical questions that merit a space of their own, such as, '*violence*', '*suicide*', '*capital punishment*' and '*terrorism*' have also been accorded a place in the course.

The reader is expected to understand these domain-specific ethical issues, the challenges they pose to some of the conventional understanding of concepts such as life, privacy, personhood, consent, confidentiality and freedom of speech and expression, and finally various theoretical frameworks developed to address these issues and dilemmas.



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**Block-I**

**Introduction to Ethics**

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## **BLOCK INTRODCUTION**

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**Block I** “Introduction to Ethics” having five units deals with the various concepts, constituent elements, and presuppositions involved in Ethics and its study. Studying these concepts at the very beginning will enable learners to understand the scope and significance of Ethics and also the various ethical theories, evolved in thousands years journey of human interaction with each other and involvement of one life into the other life and also human reflection on one’s own self and other.

**Unit 1** “Introduction to Ethics” discusses layman as well as philosophers’ understanding of ethics. It also tries to show why Ethics is a branch of Philosophy. This unit draws a historical sketch of the development of moral philosophy or ethics. In this unit, the learners will understand the scope and significance of Ethical studies in our day to day life. This unit tries to show the difference between Ethics and morality.

**Unit 2** “Moral Action” deals with the concept of moral action in the sphere of human being. This unit is an attempt to define moral action and discuss the conditions, presumptions and constituents to make an action a moral one.

**Unit 3** “Normative Theories and Their Critical Appraisal” discusses some of the major ethical theories; Aristotle’s virtue ethics, Deontological ethics of Immanuel Kant, Consequentialist ethics of John Stuart Mill. This unit is an attempt to critically examine all three ethical theories discussed. Learners will enable to not only understand the objections against these ethical theories but also will see the responses of these ethical theories to defend their positions.



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# UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS\*

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Scope of Ethics
- 1.3 History of Ethics
- 1.4 The Methods of Ethics
- 1.5 Different Approaches to the Study of Ethics
- 1.6 Division of Ethics
- 1.7 Ethics and Other Sciences
- 1.8 Ethics and Religion
- 1.9 Importance of Ethics
- 1.10 Why Should We be Moral?
- 1.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.12 Key Words
- 1.13 Further Readings and References
- 1.14 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objective of this unit is to introduce you to ‘ethics’ or moral philosophy. Ethics is a wide topic. Through the analysis of its various aspects we can learn:

- the nature and the different aspects of ethics
- how ethics developed as a systematic philosophical discipline in the western philosophy
- the methods, different approaches and the division of ethics
- how ethics is related to other sciences
- the relationship between ethics and religion
- the importance of studying ethics in the context of today and the need for being moral.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Etymologically the term “ethics” corresponds to the Greek word “*ethos*” which means character, habit, customs, ways of behaviour, etc. Ethics is also called “moral philosophy”. The word “moral” comes from Latin word “*mores*” which signifies customs, character, behaviour, etc. Thus ethics *may be defined as the systematic study of human actions from the point of view of their rightfulness or*

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\*Dr. Wilson Jose, St. John’s College, Kondadaba.

*wrongfulness, as means for the attainment of the ultimate happiness.* It is the reflective study of what is good or bad in that part of human conduct for which humans have some personal responsibility. In simple words ethics refers to what is good and the way to get it, and what is bad and how to avoid it. It refers to what ought to be done to achieve what is good and what ought not to be done to avoid what is evil.

As a philosophical discipline, ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live. It also involves the justification of these values and guidelines. It is not merely following a tradition or custom. Instead it requires analysis and evaluation of these guidelines in light of universal principles. As moral philosophy, ethics is the philosophical thinking about morality, moral problems, and moral judgements.

Ethics is a science in as much as it is a set or body of reasoned truths organised in a logical order and having its specific material and formal objects. It is a rational science in so far as its principles are deduced by human's reason from the objects that concern the free will. Besides it has for its ulterior end the art by which humans may live uprightly or comfortably to right reason. It is a normative/regulative science in as much as it regulates and directs human's life and gives the right orientation to one's existence.

Ethics is also theoretical and practical. It is theoretical in as much as it provides the fundamental principles on the basis of which moral judgements are arrived at. It is practical in as much as it is concerned about an end to be gained, and the means of attaining it.

Ethics is sometimes distinguished from morality. In such cases, ethics is the explicit philosophical reflection on moral beliefs and practices while morality refers to the first-order beliefs and practices about good and evil by means of which we guide our behaviour (e.g. music and musicology). However, in most cases they are referred to as having the same meaning.

Ethics is not merely a set of 'codes'. Ethics certainly deals with moral codes yet one cannot identify ethics to moral codes. Ethics is not primarily to restrict one's behaviour, rather to help one to find what is good and how to get it. The obligatory character of ethical norms derives from the very purpose of ethical enquiry, i.e. to discover the most ultimate principles of explanation or the most ultimate reasons why one ought to do anything.

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## 1.2 SCOPE OF ETHICS

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Ethics deals with voluntary actions. We can distinguish between human actions and actions of human: human actions are those actions that are done by human consciously, deliberately and in view of an end. Actions of human may not be wilfully, voluntarily, consciously and deliberately done but all the same they are done by human (e.g. sleeping, walking, etc.). It is the intention which makes the difference between human action and action of human. In ethics we deal only with human actions.

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## 1.3 HISTORY OF ETHICS

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The first ethical precepts were certainly passed down by word of mouth by parents and elders, but as societies learned to use the written word, they began to set down their ethical beliefs. These records constitute the first historical evidence of the origins of ethics.

In as much as it is the study of human behaviour, we cannot really trace the history of ethics. However, as a systematic study of human behaviour, we can point out how ethics evolved as a discipline. It is not that we have first a straightforward history of moral concepts and then a separate and secondary history of philosophical comment. To set out to write the history of moral philosophy involves a careful selection from the past of what falls under the heading of moral philosophy as we now conceive it. We have to strike a balance between the danger of a dead antiquarianism, which enjoys the illusion that we can approach the past without preconceptions, and the other of believing that the whole point of the past was that it should culminate with us. However, we can observe a gradual development in the ethical thought from the beginning to our day.

In *Rigved* (It is accepted that *Rigveda* is the first example/text of human wisdom; the vaidika tradition was oral tradition; pass from one generation to another generation.) we find the concept of *Rita*. *Rita* means the cosmological as well as moral law. We can consider the concept of *rita* as the first example of human pursuit towards moral philosophy. In Indian philosophy, besides moral codification, there is much debate on moral principles. We can see *Purushartha* as the aim of human life. Human beings cannot know and attain the meaning and the highest goal of life without moral life. For example, *Sadhanachatushthaya* (Sham, dam etc.) must for the preparation to Moksha (See, Samkara's advaita Vedanta). Buddhism, Jainism and even materialist philosophical tradition Carvaka developed the foundation of Moral Philosophy. *Satya, Ahimsa, Astey, Aparigrah, Brahmacharya* are the basic moral pillars accepted by almost all Indian philosophical schools, but the metaphysics to establish them is different in different schools. Buddhist establishes and interprets them with the help of *anatta* (no-soul, no external reality) metaphysics, Jainism establishes them with the help of *anekantavada* and so on.

In the Western Philosophy, the history of ethics can be traced back to the fifth century B.C with the appearance of Socrates. As a philosopher among the Greeks his mission was to awaken his fellow humans to the need for rational criticism of their beliefs and practices. It was the time, when the philosophers began to search for reasons for established modes of conduct. Socrates, in demanding rational grounds for ethical judgements, brought attention to the problem of tracing, the logical relationship between values and facts and thereby created ethical philosophy. Plato's theory of forms could be seen as the first attempt at defending moral realism and offering an objective ground for moral truths. From the *Republic* on through the later dialogues and epistles, Plato constructed a systematic view of nature, God, and human from which one derived one's ethical principles. His main goal in his ethical philosophy was to lead the way toward a vision of the Good. Aristotle differed from Plato in his method of inquiry and his conception of the role of ethical principles in human affairs. While Plato was the fountainhead of religious and idealistic ethics, Aristotle engendered the naturalistic tradition. Aristotle's ethical writings (i.e. *Eudemian Ethics*, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the *Politics*) constitute the first systematic investigation into the foundations of ethics. Aristotle's account of the virtues could be seen as one of the first sustained inquiries in normative ethics. It was a clear mixture of Greco-Roman thought with Judaism and elements of other Middle Eastern religions.

The medieval period was dominated by the thoughts of philosophers and theologians like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. The influence of Christianity dominated the ethical scenario. So much so that during this period philosophy and religion were nearly

indistinguishable. The rise of Christian philosophy produced a new era of history of ethics. In St. Augustine, the most prominent philosopher of the early medieval period, ethics became a blend of the pursuit of earthly well-being with preparation of the soul for eternal salvation. The next towering figure of medieval philosophy is Thomas Aquinas. He brought about a true reconciliation between Aristotelian science and philosophy with Augustinian theology. Aquinas greatly succeeded in proving the compatibility of Aristotelian naturalism with Christian dogma and constructing a unified view of nature, human, and God.

The social and political changes that characterized the end of the medieval period and the rise of the modern age of industrial democracy gave rise to a new wave of thinking in the ethical field. The development of commerce and industry, the discovery of new regions of the world, the Reformation, the Copernican and Galilean revolutions in science, and the rise of strong secular governments demanded new principles of individual conduct and social organization. Some of the modern philosophers who contributed to the great changes in ethical thinking were Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Benedict de Spinoza, John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill and Friedrich Nietzsche. Further developments in ethical thinking in the west came with Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Here we are not intending to give a detailed analysis of their contribution to ethics. However, the most influential ethical thought during this period were the Utilitarianism, dominated by British and French Philosophy (e.g. Locke, Hume, Bentham, Stuart Mill) and Idealistic ethics in Germany and Italy (e.g. Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche).

The contemporary ethical scenario is a further complex area of study. The contemporary European ethics in the broadest sense attempts to cover a generous range of philosophies running from phenomenology to theories of communicative action. The conditions of contemporary civilization forced philosophers to seek a genuine ground for ethics and moral life. In much of the English speaking world G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) is taken to be the starting point of contemporary ethical theory. Others like Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Levinas, Max Scheler, Franz Brentano and John Dewey too have made significant contributions to ethical thinking in other parts of the world.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1. Write a short note on the development of ethics in the western philosophy.

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**1.4 METHODS OF ETHICS**

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Ethics, as a philosophical discipline, makes use of the methods used in philosophy. Thus in ethics, both the inductive method and deductive methods are used. Deduction

is a process of gaining knowledge independently of experience through pure logical reasoning. Deductive reasoning begins with a universal or general truth and leads to knowledge of a particular instance of it. The classical form of deductive reasoning is the syllogism in which a necessary conclusion is derived from two accepted premises: e.g. All men are mortal, A is a man, and therefore, A is mortal. Induction is a process of arriving at knowledge through experience. Induction begins with the particular and moves to the universal, a generalization that accounts for other examples of the same category or class. For instance, if a number of ravens have been observed, all of which are black, and if no raven has been encountered that is not black, the inferences to the conclusion that the next observed raven will be black or to the general conclusion that all ravens are black, are inductive inferences.

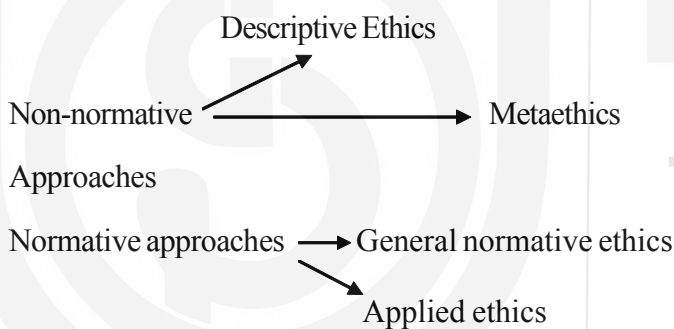
However, in ethics the inductive method (particular to the universal) is generally preferred to the deductive (universal to the particular).

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## 1.5 DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF ETHICS

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There are basically four different approaches to the study of ethics. Tom L. Beauchamp, in his book *Philosophical Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* presents them with the following diagram:



The non-normative approaches examine morality without concern for making judgements as to what is morally right or wrong. They do not take any moral position regarding moral issues. The normative approaches instead make judgements as to what is morally right or wrong. They take a clear moral position regarding moral issues.

Among the two non-normative approaches to ethics, *descriptive ethics* describe and sometimes try to explain the moral and ethical practices and beliefs of certain societies and cultures. This is what sociologists, anthropologists, and historians often do in their study and research. In their descriptions they do not make judgements about the morality of the practices and beliefs but simply describe the practices observed in the different groups or cultures. *Metaethics* focuses on the analysis of the meanings of the central terms used in ethical reasoning and decision-making. It attempts to answer questions of meaning.

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## 1.6 DIVISION OF ETHICS

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The whole study of ethics can be divided into General Ethics (nature of moral activity, norm of morality, foundation of morality, end of morality, etc) and Special Ethics (applies the principles of general ethics to the various actions of human activity).

However, when we consider the ethical theories, philosophers today usually divide them into three general subject areas: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Metaethics investigates the origin and meaning of ethical concepts. It studies where our ethical principles come from and what they mean. It tries to analyse the underlying principles of ethical values; Normative ethics tries to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. It is a more practical task. It is a search for an ideal litmus test of proper behaviour; applied ethics involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, environmental concerns, homosexuality, and so on. In applied ethics, using the conceptual tools of metaethics and normative ethics, one tries to resolve these controversial issues.

Often the lines of distinction between metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics are often blurry. For instance, the issue of abortion is an applied ethical topic in as much as it involves a specific type of controversial behaviour. But it is also an issue involving normative principles such as the right of self-rule and the right to life and an issue having metaethical issues such as, “where do rights come from?” and “what kind of beings have rights?”.

**Check Your Progress II**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. How ethics uses deductive method?

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2. Write a short note on the division of ethics.

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**1.7 ETHICS AND OTHER SCIENCES**

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In our analysis of the definition and nature of ethics, we have seen that ethics as a science is concerned with an end or ideal or standard. Most sciences, instead, are concerned with certain uniformities of our experience – with the ways in which certain classes of objects (such as rocks or plants) are found to exist, or with the ways in which certain classes of events (such as phenomena of sound or electricity) are found to occur. These sciences have no direct reference to any end that is to be achieved or to any ideal by reference to which the facts are judged.

Ethics is distinguished from the natural sciences, inasmuch as it has a direct reference to an end that human persons desire to attain. Although ethics is sometimes regarded



as a practical science, it is not a 'practical science' as medicine, engineering or architecture is as much as it is not directed towards the realization of a definite result.

Other sciences		Ethics
Psychology	How a man behaves (descriptive science)	How a man MUST behave (normative science)
Anthropology	Nature of Human Beings and Its Activity	How man's actions OUGHT to be
Social And Political Sciences	Deals with the organization of man's social and political life	How man's social and political life MUST or OUGHT TO BE organized in order to be moral
Economics	Concerned with <i>goods</i> , i.e. with those objects which are the means of satisfying any human want.	Deals with those acts which are the conditions of the attainment of the highest end of life.

## 1.8 ETHICS AND RELIGION

Ethics has no necessary connection with a particular religion. However, it is sometimes argued that without God or religion, ethics would have no point; and therefore insofar as God or religion is in question, so is ethics. This is evidently unacceptable. Although belief in God or religion can be an added reason for our being moral, it is not necessary to relate it to God or to any religion. The fact that ethics exists in all human societies shows that ethics is a natural phenomenon that arises in the course of the evolution of social, intelligent, long-lived mammals who possess the capacity to recognize each other and to remember the past behaviour of others.

Critics of religion such as Marx and Nietzsche saw religion as a profound source of social conformity, as a means of maintaining the status quo and keeping people confined to their existing social and economic positions. Yet there is another face of religion, one which suggests that religion may be a profoundly liberating force in an individual's lives and an important force for social change.

## 1.9 IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING ETHICS

Today, more than ever, the importance of ethics is felt at every sphere of human living. The situation in the present world is characterised by an increasing rate in crime, with no end to such increase in sight. Besides, the power of traditional religions to inspire moral conduct continues to decline. Terrorism, civil wars, industrial pollution, planned obsolescence, misleading advertising, deceptive labelling, crooked insurance adjusting, unfair wages, crime syndicates, illegal gambling, forced prostitution, high jacking, match-fixing... so many are the prevailing trends. Truly, there seems to be hardly a few areas in life remain untouched by growing demoralization. The question that one may ask in this precarious situation is: Are we being sucked into a moral vacuum? Is this our way to the end of ethics?

We can point out at least three reasons why we should study ethics. First, the study of moral philosophy or ethics can deepen our reflection on the ultimate questions of life. The study of ethics helps a person to look at his own life critically and to evaluate his actions/choices/decisions. It assists a person in knowing what he/she really is and what is best for him/her and what he/she has to do in order to attain it.

Second, the study of moral philosophy can help us to think better about morality. Moral philosophy can help us to clarify our moral positions when we make judgements. It improves our perspective, and makes it more reflective and better thought out. It can also improve our thinking about specific moral issues. In our everyday life we are confronted with situations in which we have to decide what is the correct course of action and what is to be avoided. Whether we choose to act or to refrain from acting, we are in either case making a choice. Every decision or choice we make we do so for reasons. However, we should agree that some of these reasons are better than the others in judging the rightness of the decision or choice. However, there seems to be a common agreement that we should all strive to do the right thing, to do what is morally acceptable in a given situation or circumstance. However, the issue of disagreement is over the question of what exactly is the right thing to do.

Third, the study of moral philosophy can help us to sharpen our general thinking processes. It trains our mind to think logically and reasonably and to handle moral issues with greater clarity. Ethics becomes inevitable as by nature human being is a 'social' being, a being living in relationship with other fellow beings and with the nature around. All actions, whether one is aware of it or not, some way or another affects the others. In order to make a decision/judgement one bases himself on a standard of right and wrong even though the measure may not be the same at all times.

Thus, ethical problems confront everybody. Nobody can really get through life without ethics, even if one may not be aware of the ethical principles. Consciously or unconsciously all of us are every day making moral decisions. Whether we are aware of it or not, the fact is that we do have ethical attitudes and are taking moral stances every day of our lives.

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### **1.10 WHY SHOULD WE BE MORAL?**

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Not few are the people who ask this question: Why should we be moral? Why should we take part in the moral institution of life? Why should we adopt a moral point of view?

In every human person there is a deep desire for good. Human beings by nature tend to be good – *summum bonum*. Each man/woman desires what is best for himself/herself. The ethical principles and moral practices help one to attain what is best. It helps a person to perfect himself/herself as a moral being. Morality has to do more with one's interior self than the practice of some customs or set rules. Viewed from this point, morality is a deep down desire in a human being and is something to do with the very nature of human being. The rational nature of human being makes him/her aware of certain fundamental principles of logical and moral reasoning. This means that there is not only a subjective aspect to every human action but also an objective one that prompts a human person to base himself/herself on certain common principles.

We also find that for the functioning of any society we need certain rules and regulations. The conditions of a satisfactory human life for people living in groups could hardly

obtain otherwise (neither a “state of nature” nor a “totalitarian state”). The institutions which are designed to make life easier and better for human being, cannot function without certain moral principles. However, here the question of individual freedom can also come in. How far the society can go on demanding? Should it not respect the freedom of the individual? Is morality made for man or man is made for morality?

Morality is a lot like nutrition. Most of us have never had a course in nutrition or even read much about it. Yet many of us do have some general knowledge of the field, of what we need to eat and what not. However, we also make mistakes about these things. Often thinking of the good a particular diet can do in the long run for our health, we may go for it although it may bring no immediate satisfaction. So too is our moral life. While nutrition focuses on our physical health, morality is concerned about our moral health. It seeks to help us determine what will nourish our moral life and what will poison it. It seeks to enhance our lives, to help us to live better lives. Morality aims to provide us with a common point of view from which we can come to agreement about what all of us ought to do. It tries to discover a more objective standpoint of evaluation than that of purely personal preference.

### Check Your Progress III

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Write a note on the relevance of Ethics.

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## 1.11 LET US SUM UP

Ethics is the study of human behaviour. It studies human actions and judges them to be right or wrong. As a philosophical discipline, ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live. In ethics we deal only with human actions, those actions done by a human person consciously, deliberately and in view of an end. In human history, the origin of ethics and moral consciousness cannot be easily traced back. It is the result of a long process of rational development and evolution.

Ethics makes use of the methods of induction and deduction. Among the different approaches to the study of ethics, the non-normative ethics (descriptive ethics and metaethics) which examine morality without concern for making judgements as to what is morally right or wrong and normative ethics (general normative ethics and applied ethics) which make judgements as to what is morally right or wrong are the most prominent ones. Although ethics can be regarded as a science it is distinguished from the natural sciences, inasmuch as it has a direct reference to an end that human person desire to attain. Ethics, however, is often said to be the fruit of all the sciences since it ultimately perfects human person, by ordering all other sciences and all things else in respect to an ultimate end that is absolutely free.

## 1.12 KEY WORDS

**‘Ethics’ and ‘Morals’** : Ethics is the theory of right and wrong conduct. While ethics involves the values that a person seeks to express in a certain situation, morals refers to the way one sets about achieving this. Ethics is concerned with the principles of human behaviour, morals with the application of these principles, in a particular situation.

**‘Moral’, ‘Immoral’ and ‘Amoral’ Actions** : An action is said to be moral when it is done deliberately to attain the ultimate happiness. A morally good action has to be a moral action and a human action. An action is moral only if it is done freely and in view of an end.

**Immoral** : Immoral means ‘not observing a particular known moral rule’. Immoral actions are all those actions that are morally bad actions (e.g. Incest, homicide, etc.). ‘Amoral’ or ‘non-moral’ means ‘not relevant to, or concerned with, morals’. We can note some of the non-moral actions: actions of inanimate objects or events (flood, famine, etc.). They are indifferent actions and are beyond the moral sphere. Reflex actions: they are automatic and immediate (e.g. breathing). Accidental acts, actions of children below the age of reason/ insane persons and actions done under the spell of hypnosis.

**Habitual actions** : They are moral actions as the habits are formed deliberately or acquired voluntarily. In ethics we are concerned with ‘immoral’ actions but not ‘amoral’ actions.

**Human Act** : A human act is an act done by a human person deliberately, willingly and freely in view of achieving an end. Morality is spoken of human beings and not of animals. An act to be a moral act, it has to be performed by an individual with reason. Every human act is done in view of an end and is done willingly with full knowledge and full freedom. Ethics deals with human actions, which help or prevent a person from attaining an end.

**End** : End of human action can be different. For a believer, in God the ultimate end could be the eternal happiness of man (God and the beatific vision). God is the highest end of man and God is involved in every action of man. Happiness consists in the knowledge and love of God. For a non believer the well-being of humanity could be the end. It could also be an act done for its own sake.

**Right and Wrong** : Ethics is defined as the science of rightfulness or wrongfulness of conduct. What makes an action right or wrong? The word “right” derives from the Latin “rectus”, meaning ‘straight’ or ‘according to norm’. An action is morally right if it is in conformity with the moral law and morally wrong if it is not in conformity with the moral law.

**Good and Bad** : The word ‘good’ denotes the attitude of mind and will. An action is morally good if it helps one attain the ultimate end and morally bad if it does not fulfill the purpose. The term ‘good’ is also used to signify something which is itself taken as an end. Thus the *summum bonum*, or supreme good, means the supreme end at which we aim.

**Voluntary and Involuntary Actions** : Acts are voluntary if they proceed from an internal principle with knowledge of the purpose of the act. An act is free if it proceeds from a self-determining agent. Are all voluntary acts free? Most of the voluntary acts are free except the highest act by which man embraces his Supreme Good.

If knowledge or free choice is totally lacking, the act is involuntary. An involuntary act may be performed without reference to the purpose of the act. It may be done with knowledge against the choice of the will, as when a man emerging from an aesthetic talks foolishly but is unable to control his words. The former emphasizes the strength of emotion with which one is choosing and the latter emphasizes that the choice is free of emotional stress.

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## 1.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress I

1. Ethics in the Western Philosophy developed mainly in Greece. Socrates, the great Greek philosopher, was the first one among the Greeks to awaken his fellow men to the need for rational criticism of their beliefs and practices. Plato, in his famous work *Republic* and in other later dialogues and epistles, constructed a systematic view of nature, God, and man from which he derived his ethical principles. Aristotle, the greatest of all Greek philosophers, contributed significantly to a systematic investigation of the foundations ethics through his ethical writings (i.e. *Eudemian Ethics*, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the *Politics*).

### Check Your Progress II

1. Ethics, like any other philosophical discipline, makes use of both the inductive method and deductive method. Deduction is a process of gaining knowledge independently of experience through pure logical reasoning. It draws a particular conclusion from a universal or general truth. For example: All men are mortal, Ram is a man, and therefore, Ram is mortal. Induction, on the other hand, begins with the particular and moves to the universal. For example: Water at Chennai boils at 100°C. Water at Kochi boils at 100°C. Water at Mumbai boils at 100°C. Therefore water boils at 100°C.
2. The whole study of ethics can be divided into General Ethics and Special Ethics. However, considering the different ethical theories, philosophers divide it into three general subject areas: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Metaethics investigates the origin and meaning of ethical concepts. Normative ethics tries to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. Applied ethics

involves examining specific controversial issues such as abortion, ecological problems, etc.

### Check Your Progress III

1. The relevance and need of ethics is felt more than ever in our society today. We can point out at least three reasons why we should study ethics. First, the study of moral philosophy or ethics can deepen our reflection on the ultimate questions of life. It helps a person to look critically at the most important questions concerning our existence here on earth. Second, the study of moral philosophy can help us to think better about morality. It can help us to clarify our moral positions when we make judgments. Third, the study of moral philosophy can help us to sharpen our general thinking processes. It trains our mind to think logically and reasonably and to handle moral issues with greater clarity.



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## UNIT 2 MORAL ACTION\*

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Definition
- 2.3 Philosophical Views
- 2.4 Religious Views
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Key Words
- 2.7 Further Readings and References
- 2.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit presents,

- the meaning of moral actions, and
- explains the philosophical implications of moral actions,
- elucidates the differences between moral and non-moral action/sciences.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Being human entails living together or living amongst others. No one likes living in isolation, as this is witnessed from birth itself. A child longs for her mother when she feels that her mother is not around. This longing of a child for her mother exposes the inexplicable bond human beings indefinitely have among each other in a society, as it is an inevitable part of being human. We cannot deny the fact that we live in a society. Each shares a common place and a common understanding among us. By living in a society, we inculcate some kind of concerns like faith, trust, loyalty, etc. that creates a bond among each one of us. Life is all about acting upon these concerns and for this, we are trained to follow certain moral obligations in some way or the other.

The very aspect of being human is morally obligatory because morality is the basic requirement of our life as human adults. But the way through which one can analyze the nature of moral obligation is by clarifying what morality is and how are we to act morally? This question opens up some newer dimensions to approach the related questions like, whether all our actions are considered moral or does an action consist of certain elements for which it is called a moral action. If so, then what could be the elements? Therefore, to understand what a “moral action” means or when are we supposed to call particular actions as moral actions we need to investigate both these terms “action” and “moral” separately. For this, let us first try and analyze what an action means and then further move on to investigate the element of morality underlying

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an action. Nonetheless, to speak of all human action as having a moral dimension should not be taken to mean that all actions are essentially moral actions for there is something profoundly moral that is not true in all species of action.

An action or an act is a movement done or generated by an agent to produce a result. It does not occur like an event but is generated by the agent of the act because of the motive or the intention the agent has. Every action consists of an agent, a motive or will or intention, and a result. For example, “John’s gave alms to the poor” is an action because it did not simply happen like, “The sun rises every day on the east.” In this above example, the first statement is an action because John’s acted out of an intention or a motivation to help the poor and along with that he had the end in his mind, i.e., to make the poor happy. The second statement is an event that happens every day without any failure because of the calculation of time and rotation of the earth. There is no intention behind the rising of the Sun. Only when someone is directed by an intention, a motive, or a will then it results in action because one actively takes part and strives to accomplish its goal. Many moral philosophers discuss that concept of motive, or will, or intention is a peculiar element of action. Without this element, many other moral concepts would not have been possible like that of moral responsibility, moral ownership, etc. This does not entitle us to consider that all actions are moral, but we also cannot deny that all our actions are evaluative to some or the other extent. The attempt to evaluate our actions results in categorizing it under right, wrong or moral, immoral, and amoral actions. This possibility of evaluating an action as right or wrong is by investigating the intention, or motive, or will of that person.

Moral action is any action that proceeds from our deliberate will, intention, or motive. We need not contrast moral with immoral acts whenever a question is put forth, i.e. When can we call a particular action moral? A moral act must be our own act, i.e., it must spring from our own will. If we act upon the direction of others, then there is no moral content in such acts. From the earliest human history, moral actions and religious actions are inescapably joined. In this case it is difficult to judge the morality of action because we cannot penetrate the depth of his mind. Different philosophers have given different theories in order to explain how action has its moral worth- Deontology, Teleology, and Virtue. This unit will explicate all these theories in order to understand how an action is morally worthy and show the possibilities of immoral or moral actions.

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## 2.2 DEFINITION

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The term moral is derived from the Latin word *mos* that means custom or habit. From this, it can be derived that when an action is performed deliberately we can judge them good or bad and this can be further clubbed into moral and immoral actions.

By moral action, it means those actions that are within the moral sphere and are thus objects of moral judgments. These actions are distinguished from non-moral actions, those actions that are devoid of moral quality and scope of moral judgment. In a wider sense the word moral means that in which moral quality, (rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness) is present, i.e., what is right or wrong, good or bad. And an action performed means that which is performed by a rational agent, not through blind impulse or inclination but knowledge and free choice of means and end. The instinctive action is not a moral action because instinctive actions are found most explicitly in lower animals. Instinctive actions cannot be called as good or bad, right or wrong as animals cannot discriminate between right and wrong are non-moral. Actions of

psychically uninformed, children, actions done under the spell of hypnotic forces, actions are done under compulsion are non-moral. For some philosophers, every human act in itself is not good but one if done with good intention. Immanuel Kant considers that an action is morally worthy only if done out of good will. A good will is likely to be useful, but it is not good because it is useful. Its value would not be affected by an accidental lack of utility. Moral action is not done for the sake of usefulness or to own any kind of merit. Two men may have done the same thing, but the act of one may be moral, and that of the other contrary. Take, for instance, a man who feeds the poor out of great pity and another feeds with the motive of gaining position or with some such selfish end. Though the action is the same, the act of the one is moral and that of the other non-moral. When we use the word “moral” it is being used in connection with moral goodness for indicating that we aim at goodness of character.

It seems that most philosophers regard the motives of a person as factors that make her action morally good or bad. Apparently, some of them think that motives are the only relevant factors for an action’s morality. It is obvious that motives are important for the morality of an action but not necessarily. If a person spends money to help the poor, her motivation tends to make her action morally good, and we recognize her to be a morally good person. But if she spends the money only because she regards it as a lucrative investment, her action may be prudent, but it would not be morally praiseworthy. But motive and intention of an action cannot be distinguished in thought but practice. For instance, if A puts poison into B’s coffee with the intention to kill him, his motive may have been the hope to inherit B’s wealth. Electra intentionally killed an old woman but unintentionally her mother. If she had killed her mother intentionally, we would judge his deplorable action differently. Actions can be morally bad even if motives are good. Suppose that a person A does something because she thinks it will make B happy. She is however aware that her action will harm C and D. Here, A is only concerned about B and is indifferent to C and D. A is, therefore, acting from a good motive (she wishes to make B happy), but what she does is nevertheless not morally good. The reason for this is not her motive but lack of certain other motives. Due to lack of some motives made the action in the above example bad or else it would have been good. This points out to the idea that many actions are morally bad even when their motives are not blameworthy. Take the case of a thief. A boy steals Rs 500 from the purse of a rich woman, but the woman shouts out to the crowd that he has stolen Rs 2000 from her. On being caught by the boy, he returns the Rs 500 to a woman. The boy says that due to lack of Rs 500 he is unable to consult the doctor because the doctor denies treating her without the payment. In this case, the boy’s motive was to cure his mother and release her from pain, but this action is morally bad because he would gain something only by taking away someone else’s property. He is not motivated by his knowledge that it harms the rich woman. Morality of an action is not only determined by its intention, but unintentional actions could also be blameworthy. The goodness of an action depends on how a person has been trained throughout life. When, for example, toddlers are taught to avoid hurting others. Later, many children begin to regularly say “please” and “thank you.” These do not come pre-programmed but are inculcated through external training.

What sets moral action apart from other species of action? How do we know that the action we perform is a moral one? Essentially, moral action is an action of moral value such that one’s moral consciousness comes to work as one is called to make a moral response. Moral action is not a one-time but is an ongoing, continuous process. It can be said that by choosing the good, we become good. By choosing to tell the truth, one

becomes honest like the case of the boy who stole Rs 500. However, honesty exhibited once does not make one honest to be such, one has to choose consistently to be honest. It may sound straightforward and formulaic, but actual moral action can be far more complex. Hence, becoming good, as the word “becoming” itself connotes, involves a constant struggle. Every action demands thinking, and decision-making and every moral action calls for rational deliberation and affirmation of our humanity. Moral action touches on one’s moral ideals. Our moral ideals pertain to what is believed to constitute a life that is worthy of humans which are a product of generations of shaping via our tradition and which come to the fore as summoned by action. Actions which proceed from natural programming of the body such as instinctive, thoughtless movements, mannerism, and reflex actions are not considered to be properly moral actions as they happen outside the control of the human agent. Likewise, any action is done by an individual out of honest ignorance hardly fits in the criteria of moral action. Moral actions are actions that proceed from the deliberate free will of human beings. Every individual human action that proceeds from deliberate reason must be good or bad. Moral actions are those actions that properly belong to conscious, rational, free human beings. Let us highlight the key elements of moral actions:

- (1) Moral actions are done by an agent with knowledge or consciousness i.e. voluntariness as opposed to actions that are out of ignorance. Knowledge here pertains to knowledge of facts surrounding or characterizing the situation, the choices available and also the possible consequences of the choices. For instance, a person unaware that her friend is allergic to onions serves her an onion cutlet. Had she known about her allergy, she could have served a cutlet with a different filling. Due to ignorance of his friend’s medical state cancels out moral responsibility except when such ignorance is totally beyond remedy.
- (2) Moral actions involve freedom.

Moral action is any act done by mostly accepted and deemed good values in any society where the act is being performed. Every society has some values, some ground rules, which determine whether something is good, or bad which is the result of numerous factors like history, culture, dominant religion, economical conditions, level of education and so on. Also with time values keep changing. The community or society we live in sets the level of morality. This also varies with different cultures and the way people respond depending on nature and other humans.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Write a short note on Moral Action.

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2. How is a moral action different from a non-moral action?

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## 2.3 RELIGIOUS VIEWS

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The religious experience provides a framework within which moral behavior is a part. From the religious point of view, a moral action is one that helps the human being to attain the ultimate end, i.e., the Supreme good, which is God. Consequently, those acts are morally good for a human that brings her nearer to God, the ultimate end of one’s existence. We shall discuss moral action according to religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, and Christianity.

### 2.3.1 Hinduism

The concept of moral action has been depicted and presented in the most famous scripture- The *Bhagavad Gita*. The summon bonum of *Gita* is realization of God or the consolidation of society (*loksamgraha*). The means for the realization of the ultimate end are following certain duties known as *Varna Ashram*, *Nitya dharma*, and *Namitic dharma* etc. There are two underlying principles in Hinduism –Dharma, and Karma that explain moral thought and action. The central teaching of *Bhagavad Gita* is *Nishkam Karma*. This, however, does not mean disinterested action as it is interpreted as an action not for the fulfillment of any selfish desire but rather for social welfare or with intention of realization of God. It means that the allocated work done without expectations, motives or thinking about its outcomes will purify one’s mind and gradually makes an individual fit to see the value of reason and the benefits of renouncing the action itself. God controls the results of actions, but in order to become a dynamic instrument of divine action after understanding this order and complete self-submission to God, it is important to act with determination. True self-realization lies in self-surrender. In Hinduism, *Dharma* is one of the all-encompassing terms; it can mean religion, law, duty, order, morality, justice. *Dharma* fundamentally underlies conceptions of morality in Hinduism. To act out of duty is, in essence, to act appropriately, what is appropriate is determined by the content in which the action is to be performed and who is performing it. *Karma* is intimately associated with dharma in this regard. Positive actions produce positive effects; negative actions produce negative effects. To act dharmically is to act in karmically positive manner, when one acts dharmically only then one produces positive karma.

### 2.3.2 Jainism

Jainism emphasizes on the necessity of self-effort to move the soul towards divine consciousness and liberation. Any soul that has conquered its own inner enemies is prescribed five moral principles to be observed, i.e., *Pancha Vrathas- Ahimsa, Satya, Asetya, Brahmacharya, Aparigraha*. The main teaching of Jainism is that every soul is the architect of its own life, here or hereafter. Like Buddhists, Hindus, Jainas believe that good conduct leads to better circumstances in life and bad conduct leads to worse. Jainism maintains that there are triple gems ( right view, right knowledge and right conduct) that provide the way to realization of correct action. However, since they conceive Karma to be a material substance that draws the soul back to its body, all actions both good or bad lead to rebirth in the body. No action can help a person

achieve liberation from rebirth. For Jainism, the moral life is one which is free from all attachments to worldly things, including attachment to sensual enjoyment. It encourages spiritual development through cultivation of one's own personal wisdom and reliance on self-control.

### 2.3.3 Buddhism

For Buddhism, a moral action is one which is devoid of suffering as it places great emphasis on the sanctity of life. The four noble truths of Buddhism are the guiding principles of moral thought and action, particularly as expressed in the Eightfold path. The motivation for following the noble truths is not to be good per se but to facilitate the realization the Buddhists call Enlightenment. The eight-fold path is a set of guidelines for acceptable or correct behavior. The initial precept is non-injury or non-violence to all living creatures. The eight items in the eightfold path are often divided into three categories: Right view, Right conduct and Right practice. Within the Right view, there are two items (1) Right understanding and (2) Right thought. In Right conduct, there are (3) Right speech (4) Right action (5) Right livelihood. In Right practice there are (6) Right effort (7) Right Mindfulness (8) Right concentration. This eight fold path originally directs an agent towards the ultimate goal of enlightenment which also is behavioral guidelines. It never asks for blind faith, it never seeks to promote learning a process of self-discovery. For Buddhism, moral action is one, which holds respect, generosity, self-control, honesty, and compassion.

### 2.3.4 Islam

Islamic ethical thinking begins from the premise that the most fundamental relationship in the life of human beings is their relationship with God. For Islam, a moral action is one when derived from one of the five categories: the obligatory, the prohibited, the superogatory, the disfavored, and the indifferent. One of the most important aspects of a Muslim's life is to have high moral standards. The view point of Islam is that the universe is the creation of God and everything is functioning under his command. Unlike the commonly held beliefs that man is evil by nature, Islam hopes that man is born with a morally good nature that responds to faith and ethical values. Over time, it may get corrupted due to temptations and man's inability to exercise control over desires. For human's conduct to be moral as per Islam, there are two conditions which must be fulfilled: one's intention must be good and one's action must be according to what God has instructed. For example, if a wrong deed was done with good intentions that ultimately produced good outcome, it cannot be termed as moral. If the intentions were wrong to begin with and the outcome was accidentally good, there is no question of moral behavior. Good intentions and good deeds must go hand in hand.

### 2.3.5 Christianity

For Christianity, life should be a worship of God, which is expressed not only in rituals and prayers but also upon how a Christian lives. In his or her seeking to live a moral life, a Christian tries to obey the rules for his or her behavior that have been decreed by God and recorded in the Bible. For Christianity, morality is derived from God and since God is a benevolent one so whatever he commands is morally good. God is the standard that we have a reference. Moral action is performed by sincere confession of one's sin as such confession demonstrates one's acceptance of God's will and love. Actions are morally good because God commands them and what God commands is morally good because it was He commanded it.

### Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

What is a moral action, according to Immanuel Kant?

1. Write a short note on the Buddhism and Jainism’s outlook on moral action.

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## 2.4 PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS

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The philosophical views on moral action are explicated through the different moral theories that are structured by different philosophers. This unit attempts to explain how the different moral theorists try to understand what a moral action is? The ultimate concern of a moral theory is to guide in making the decisions and judgments relating to various actions viz. moral or non-moral. Moral theories are broadly classified into three: Teleological theory, Deontological theory and Virtue theory. All these moral theories have presented their moral standards from different angles. Let us deliberate these theories with their respective principles of actions separately.

### 2.4.1 Teleological Theories

The word teleology is derived from the Greek word *telos* which means goal or purpose. Teleology is the study of goals, ends, and purposes. It locates moral goodness in the consequence of our behavior and not the behavior itself. In other words, an action is morally right or good if the consequence of that action is more favorable than unfavorable. According to the teleological theorists, what is morally right, wrong, or obligatory is what produces good results. Nothing is intrinsically good or bad. Teleological theories are based on reflective desires, i.e., pleasure, happiness and the good of the individual. These reflective desires of the individual are the ends and the actions should be the prime focus of ethical deliberation. The rightness and wrongness of an action are based on the goodness and badness of their consequences. According to teleological moral theory, all rational human actions are teleological in the sense that we reason about the means of achieving certain ends. For instance, the wrongness of telling a lie or intentionally harming someone depends on whether these actions produce good or bad results. A lie, if it prevents suffering might by consequentialists be the right thing to do. Moral behavior is goal-directed so from a teleological point of view, human behavior is neither right nor wrong in itself. However, from the teleological perspective, motives really have nothing to do with rightness or wrongness of the act. What matters is what might happen as a consequence of those actions in any given context. Teleological moral theories must somehow connect the consequences of human behavior to the foundational moral concepts of good and bad, right and wrong, and moral and immoral. The hallmark of most teleological moral theories is that they identify these moral concepts with pleasure and pain or happiness and unhappiness. Hence, moral actions are good, right, or moral

in so far as they lead to pleasurable consequences and bad, wrong or immoral if they lead to the painful consequences. There are three types of teleological theories-

**2.4.1.1 Ethical egoism-** For this theory, an action is morally appropriate if the consequence of an action is more favorable than unfavorable only to the moral agent acting. Epicurus, Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Adam Smith are the advocates of this theory.

**2.4.1.2 Ethical Altruism-** an action is morally right if the consequences of an action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone except the moral agent. Ethical altruism inspires an individual to sacrifice personal projects and dedicate themselves for the cause of others so that it will be treated as the most beneficent cause of an action.

**2.4.1.3 Ethical Utilitarianism-** an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone. Classical or Ethical Utilitarianism is one of the main theories brought under the rubric of teleological ethics. This is further broken into two main components- a theory of value and a theory of right action. Firstly, it endorses Hedonism as a theory of value. Hedonism means happiness or pleasure as the supreme end of life. Secondly, it endorses consequentialism as a theory of right action. Jeremy Bentham and J.S Mill are the main exponents of this theory. They developed the position that it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that measures the rightness and wrongness of an act. Mill formulates the principle of utility that he regards as a fundamental moral principle. By principle of utility he means the principle which approves or disapproves of every action according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish happiness of the party whose interest is in question.

### Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the arguments forwarded by teleological theory on moral action?

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### 2.4.2 Deontological Theory

For deontologists a moral action is essentially about following a set of rules that forbid or require certain actions. These rules specify actions that are right or wrong about the rule in the question. The word deontology is derived from the Greek word *deon* and *logos* which means duty and study, so deontology is the study of duty. Deontological theorists hold that moral goodness has nothing to do with generating pleasure, happiness, and consequences. The wrongness of an action is intrinsic or resides in the kind of action that is rather than the consequences it brings about. Deontologists equate right or wrong actions with obedience or disobedience to moral laws. They consider rightness or wrongness as intrinsic to certain types of actions. They tend to identify the rightness and wrongness of an action with fixed principles of conduct. It judges the morality of an action upon the intrinsic value of the act. For deontologists what makes a choice

right is its conformity with the moral norm. Such moral norms are to be obeyed by each moral agent. In this sense, for such deontologists, the right is said to have priority over the good. Certain actions ought to be right even if they do not produce good consequences for the rightness of such actions consists of certain norms. Deontological theories are by definition duty-based. That is to say that morality consists in the fulfillment of moral obligations and duties. Duties are further associated with obeying absolute moral rules. Human beings are morally required to do certain acts to uphold a rule or law. The rightness or wrongness of moral rule is determined independently of its consequences or happiness.

Immanuel Kant’s theory is perhaps the most well-known example of the deontological approach. For Kant, an action can have moral worth if and only if it is done from duty. His notion of acting from duty is in standard manner understood as doing what is right through the moral law. Whether a course of action is morally permissible will depend on whether or not it conforms to moral law i.e. Categorical Imperative. Categorical imperatives are the unconditional commands. It has three different formulations:

- (1) The first formulation- Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law
- (2) The second formulation- Act as to treat humanity, both in your person and in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never simply as a means.
- (3) The third formulation-Every rational being must so act as if he were through this maxim, always legislating members in the universal kingdom of ends.

Our duties are to be understood regarding respecting this imperative. Kant considered that the imperative should not be hypothetical, as it cannot be derived from the consideration of any end outside of the will of the individual. The categorical imperative has no reference to the external ends but in the right direction of the will itself. Human beings must have access to the moral truth to be responsible agents at all. Throughout the *Groundwork*, Kant argues that a moral action is one that is for the sake of the moral law. There is no particular content in the moral law so it cannot tell us what the matter or content of our actions ought to be but can only instruct us. For instance, we are obliged to keep our promises even when keeping them results in less good. Kant believed that morality was *a priori* and investigating moral we need to look at pure practical reason. For him, the reason is what makes us capable of morality, to begin with. No conduct is regarded can be regarded as truly virtuous which rests on feeling but reason. Kantian morality commands that we take the right attitude in action, not just the performance of the right act. An act is morally good for him if it proceeds from a subjective principle or maxim that is fit to be a universal law. Kant, unlike Mill, believed that certain types of actions (murder, theft, and lying) were prohibited even if it brings more happiness than the alternative.

**Check Your Progress IV**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1. What is a moral action, according to Immanuel Kant?

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### 2.4.3 Virtue Ethics

For Virtue ethicists, an action is moral or virtuous if it is performed through practical deliberation and not out of ignorance. Morality stems from the identity or character of the individual rather than being a reflection of the action of the individual. Aristotle has been the main source of inspiration of virtue ethics. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he urged that the best life of a human is *eudemonia* that occupies the exercise of virtues or excellences. He says that there is nothing about having a life except the exercise of virtues. This is a concept fostered by Stoics also. Virtue ethics describes the character of a moral agent as a driving force for the ethical behavior rather than rules those set by Kant. Virtue is the primary mode of evaluation as opposed to the act evaluates such as right and wrong. Virtue is the habit or quality that allows the bearer to succeed at his or her or its purpose. The virtue of a knife, for example, is the sharpness and that of a racehorse is speed. Thus, to identify the virtues for human beings, one must have an account of what human purpose is. According to Aristotle, virtue is seen as a quality that leads to *eudemonia* or well-being. He categorized virtue as moral and intellectual.

A virtue ethicist would, however, focus less on lying in any particular instance and instead consider one's character and moral behavior, the decision to tell a lie or not to tell a lie. It refers to the collection of normative acts that emphasize being rather than doing. A virtue ethicists philosopher will identify virtues, desirable characteristics that the moral or virtuous person embodies. Possessing these virtues is what makes one moral and one's actions are a mere reflection of one's inner morality. An action cannot be used as a demarcation of morality because a virtue encompasses more than just a simple selection of action. Instead, it is about the way of being that would cause the person exhibiting the virtue to make a certain virtuous choice consistently in each situation. The agent chooses virtue and chooses to perform the virtuous action but choosing virtuous act the agent in choosing exhibits practical wisdom, knowledge of what he is doing and why it is good. This entails that the virtuous agent cannot act out of ignorance. Otherwise, he would not be genuinely choosing and would not be exhibiting practical wisdom. Take for instance that there are two individuals Karb and Barb- Karb is a naturally good person who enjoys helping others-she isn't too bright, but her nature is such that she ends up helping people simply out of the kindness of heart. This kindness on his part is not cultivated; it is just a part of her personality, her basic nature. Barb, on the other hand, is also a kind of person but someone who has worked at it by developing good habits. She is good because she chose to be; she rationally and effectively endorsed virtue and set out on a path to be virtuous. She might have been helped along by having good parents who instilled good values, but still, the choice was hers to make when she grew up. She was able to rationally reflect on her character and make decisions about what to endorse. In Aristotle's view, Karb is someone who has natural goodness but no true virtue. Barb, on the other hand, has a genuine virtue because she has chosen virtue: she displayed practical wisdom. Karb has not and so her goodness in a way is accidental because it is operating by a kind of mindless instinct. For Aristotle, a virtuous person is a person who functions harmoniously- his desires and emotions do not conflict with what he knows to be right.

David Hume also wrote on virtue ethics. He views virtues as mental qualities as pleasing: they are pleased because they are conducive to the social utility in some respect. Thus, he places no heavy psychological requirements on virtue. Having virtue means that one has a pleasing quality. The virtuous person does not need to have wisdom or intelligence, though they would count as intellectual virtues because they are pleasing and useful qualities. Hume’s account does depend on a certain view of human nature. We are the sorts of creatures moved by feelings of sympathy for others, as well as concern for ourselves. He believed that people are motivated by self-interest but that they are also motivated by love and sympathy for others. This sympathy forms the basis for morality. The pain of another is bad, and when I see this, I react sympathetically to the person. For instance, I would probably feel pity for a person if I see him being tortured. He said that when we make moral evaluations what we are most concerned about are the motives. The primary focus of moral evaluation is the internal states, the agent associated with virtue or having good character traits.

**Check Your Progress V**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1. What is the primary focus of moral evaluation, according to David Hume?

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**2.5 LET US SUM UP**

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Morality is, therefore, an institution of human life under which questions such as, ‘which conduct is right and which one is wrong?’, ‘which character is good and which one is bad?’ are raised and answered. However, Morality is synonymous with moral goodness or moral rightness. To say that some act is moral is not to say in this sense that it may be judged either as right or wrong, But to say that it is right. The essence of morality consists in promoting the welfare of others, or in practicing non-violence or control of senses, etc. Being moral does not simply mean being right or being of a good conduct and character but also being a moral agent whose action or actions may be judged either right or wrong. The concept of moral action is different according to both religious and philosophical views as described above. Many thinkers have explained the content of morality in an action through different formulations. Their formulations have been represented in form of theories like, Deontology, Teleology and Virtue ethics.

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**2.6 KEY WORDS**

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- Morality** : Morality is a set of customs and habits that shape how we think about how we should live or about what is a good human life.
- Action** : It is a deliberative movement performed by a human agent.
- Intention** : it is more than a mere wish, a conspicuous change that we aim to bring.

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## 2.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERNCES

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## 2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check your progress I

1. Moral action is an action that is acted through one's will or intention to accomplish one's deliberative goals. An act is a moral one when acted through one's reasoning capability. Considering that, human beings are rational agents so their actions are always evaluative since not every human action can be moral. Therefore, all human actions are evaluated as either morally good or bad and right or wrong. When the word "moral action" is used, it is presented in connection with moral goodness for indicating that we aim at goodness of the character.

Two elements explain the nature of a moral action. They are- Knowledge or Voluntariness and Freedom.

2. A moral action is an action of moral value such that one's moral consciousness comes to work to make a moral response. A non-moral action is one that is devoid of moral quality and scope of moral judgment. Immoral action is one that is the violation of the accepted principles of right and wrong of a given society.

### Check progress II

1. The Buddhists and the Jaina outlook on the question of moral action seem more or less similar. The eight-fold path and the triple gems are set of guidelines for acceptable or correct behavior. Actions are good or bad not in terms of the external consequences they produce, but the inner motive that prompts them. For them, the only consequence does not determine the rightness or wrongness of action.

### Check progress III

1. According to teleological theory, what is morally right, wrong, or obligatory is what produces good results. Nothing is intrinsically good or bad. Moral behavior is goal-directed so from a teleological point of view, human behavior is neither right nor wrong in itself. However, from the teleological perspective, motives really have nothing to do with rightness or wrongness of the act. There are three different teleological theories; Ethical egoism, Ethical altruism, and Ethical Utilitarianism.

### Check progress IV

1. Immanuel Kant holds that moral goodness has nothing to do with generating pleasure, happiness, and consequences. The wrongness of an action is intrinsic or resides in the kind of action that is rather than the consequences it brings about. For Kant, an action can have moral worth if and only if it is done from duty. His notion of acting from duty is in standard manner understood as doing what is right through the moral law. Whether a course of action is morally permissible will depend on whether or not it conforms to moral law i.e. Categorical Imperative.

### Check progress V

1. According to David Hume, the primary focus of moral evaluation is the internal states, the agent associated with virtue or having good character traits. He believed that the basis of morality is that people are motivated by self-interest but that they are also motivated by love and sympathy for others.



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## UNIT 3 NORMATIVE THEORIES AND THEIR CRITICAL APPRAISAL\*

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Major Ethical Theories: An Overview
- 3.3 Critical Appraisal of Utilitarianism
- 3.4 Critical Appraisal of Deontological Ethics
- 3.5 Critical Appraisal of Virtue Ethics
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Key Words
- 3.8 Further Readings and References
- 3.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objectives of the Unit are as follows:

- To understand the basic themes and presuppositions of major ethical (normative) theories; Utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics,
- To analyze these ethical theories,
- To critically examine these ethical theories.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit will primarily focus on critically analyzing the theories of normative ethics discussed so far, namely, Virtue Ethics, Utilitarianism, and Kant's deontological ethics. These theories are the major theories of ethics that have dominated the human psyche by providing reasons for their actions for ages. The action-guiding principle for our actions provided by these theories is assisting us in understanding questions such as what is right and what is wrong? How to decide what is good or bad in a particular situation? And, related to it, the overarching question of how to live peacefully in a society. Living in peace is directly connected with how to be good as an individual and as a society.

Critical reflections of these theories will help us to reformulate and reorganize our action-guiding principles for a better living.

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### 3.2 MAJOR ETHICAL THEORIES: AN OVERVIEW

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All the theories of ethics intend to provide the answer to the question – how one ought to act in a situation involving others. Actions of a free agent are always subject to moral

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evaluation of whether an action is right or wrong/good or bad. Ethical theories help us determine our actions by providing some action-guiding principles. For example, we ought to act in ways that will maximize the overall utility (Utilitarianism in a general sense). Moral assessment of our actions is necessary for building a peaceful society. People in societies full of immoral or ethically bad people will not lead their lives peacefully as forgery, corruption, stealing, murder, etc. will be rampant. As individuals, we need to understand principles that help us to be good individuals. Thus we need to define and understand the ethical principles through which people's conduct would largely be assessed and judged.

As a theory of ethics, Utilitarianism provides the perspective that the utility of an action/policy/law/rule should be the basis of determining whether an action is ethically good or bad. The nature of utility an action or a policy produces ought to be considered for its moral evaluation. The moral judgment of an action is not dependent upon the action in-itself but the good or bad it brings. This theory opines that we should assess the overall outcomes of an action or what an action produces or the overall consequences it has to pass a value judgment about the action. This approach does not take into consideration the value of an action in itself. Speaking the truth itself might have intrinsic value apart from what good it might bring. Understanding good and bad within the utilitarian framework has been understood, associating it with pleasure and pain. An action is right or wrong is dependent on how much overall happiness or unhappiness it produces. Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick are the three major proponents of this theory.

Deontological theories of ethics provide the understanding that ethical norms or principles are of prime importance. Moral norms and laws are required to define the duties of a moral agent. Immanuel Kant, the major advocate of this theory, provides the understanding that we ought to morally assess the action or a policy in-itself through the prism of already defined rules and laws and not its consequences for the value judgment of an action. Apart from that, this theory holds that it is not rational to discharge one's duty for the sake of any other element/motivation than to fulfill one's duty. "Duty for the sake of Duty" is one of the central tenets of this theory. Breaking the ethical law e.g., it is wrong to lie, is wrong in any circumstances even if that saves a person's life. Circumstantial or consequential benefits are not significant for making a moral judgment on an action. People's intention for doing an action holds an essential factor for this theory for judging an action.

In contrast to both the theories mentioned above where actions or policies proposed to assess for making a moral judgment, Virtue ethics holds that it is crucial to evaluate a person's character and following that the action s/he is doing. Being just, honest, truthful, courageous and kind to others are the character traits that individuals should develop to be a good person and do good. Lying, deceiving, and betrayal are the traits discouraged from being cultivated in one's character. This ethical approach explains that if individual beings of society are good, society will eventually become a good society. Virtue ethicists find it more appropriate to focus on the internal aspect of individual beings than on the external for proper assessment of their moral character.

All the normative principles provided aim to achieve a good society by guiding people's actions and their character. But these theories also face some criticism. In the following sections, we will critically evaluate the principles of all the above-mentioned theories of ethics.

## Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the principle that Utilitarianism provides for ethical assessment of an action?

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2. Discuss in brief the major difference between Utilitarianism and Deontology.

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### 3.3 CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF UTILITARIANISM

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James Rachel (2012) points out that Utilitarianism, as a theory of ethics, can be understood by understanding three of its locus points. First, the consequence of an action is the only thing that matters for assessing any action morally. Second, we should measure the consequences of action based on how much pleasure and pain it produces in terms of its quantity and quality. Third, in assessing consequences, each individual's pleasure and pain should get an equal amount of consideration (Rachel, 2012: p. 110). There should not be any discrimination in appraising pleasure and pain based on an individual's position in society, class, caste, religion, sex, etc.

Bentham argues that the central aim of morality is to make the world happy as much as possible. This principle requires individuals to produce maximum happiness in any situation if s/he is to be a morally good person. Maximum happiness means it should make people happier, as many as possible. In addition to that, to be morally good, a particular action must produce happiness over sorrow; otherwise, we should consider it as bad.

For Mill, happiness is the end, which is desirable, and every other thing is desirable to reach that end. For example, my desire for food will surely fill my empty stomach, but ultimately feeding myself will make me happy. Otherwise, starvation would lead to a painful situation, and we should avoid it.

Following Rachel, the first criticism that comes into our mind is that is pleasure all that matters for morality? Adding to that, can we morally judge our actions/policies/principles solely based on how much pain and pleasure produces? For example, is it right on the part of a group of students to rag/torture the new student in class just because it is pleasurable for them? Is it a good or right thing to lie before the court of law as it would make the maximum number of people happy? We can also understand the magnitude of these questions by turning them around. Is everything that produces maximum

happiness or pleasure morally right or good? In that regard, killing an innocent person would also amount to a good act if it produces happiness among the maximum number of people. We can cite another often-used example against Utilitarianism here. Suppose a person used to peep into a family's bathroom, but none of the family members is aware of it. Whatever kind of pleasure that person is getting from peeping, is without harming anybody, and not in the victim's knowledge. Pain or sorrow is not exceeding pleasure as the victims are unaware of it. So, the action produces maximum happiness, at least to the extent the person is not getting caught. Now, the question is, can we consider the act as a good act? Utilitarians would answer this question positively. Even if we do not bring in the concerns of justice and violations of people's right to privacy, our general understanding of good and bad would consider the act as a bad one.

Related to the point mentioned above, we can argue against Utilitarianism that the life of a human being is constituted and guided by many factors, and one among them is happiness/pleasure. Considering happiness as the only guiding factor for various human actions is giving excessive prominence to it. Other elements of human life like justice, truth, rights are seemingly secondary to happiness in the Utilitarian framework. One may object that justice or rights are values if established, ultimately leading to a happy society. It might be the case. But justice should prevail in society irrespective of whether its consequences would make the majority of people happy or not. For example, a vicious criminal should get harsh punishment even if that event might make maximum people sad.

We can substantiate the accusation against Utilitarianism that it advocates the majority's rule by raising the issues of violation of rights and justice. For example, if there is a gross human rights violation in a country and that too gives pleasure to the majority of the people, Utilitarians would face difficulty in condemning it as wrong. This kind of situation becomes complex when the headcount of people for proving the majority (as pleasure of the maximum number of people does matter in Utilitarianism) and minority is like 60 and 40. The moral decision about good and bad would favor the majority as they have the maximum numbers. The pertinent question that arises here is whether morality, i.e., whether an action or event or policy is good or bad, depends on just numbers? Any hostile action that affects adversely to the 40 people is still wrong. Utilitarianism seems not to accommodate these kinds of concerns in the theory.

We generally understand the utilitarian approach as consequentialist. That means what matters for the ethical assessment of action is the result/consequences of the action. If the output failed to produce pleasure over pain, we should consider it as a bad action. If the results make maximum people happy, then the action is good. However, philosophers like Amartya Sen have defended this kind of an approach where we need to assess an action's results before doing it. He argues that to avoid negative consequences of a particular action we need to foresee (which we can do easily) the relevant consequences that action might bring and then decide whether we ought to do it or not. What action is producing is important to consider in passing a moral judgment about the action in-itself. But the objection against this approach is that consequences are not the only thing based on which we should give a value judgment. In many cases, the action in-itself might be right or wrong. For example, torturing a child is wrong in-itself irrespective of the consequences it might bring.

The approach of maximizing utility in terms of pleasure gives Utilitarianism a relativistic framework. No right act or good act can be considered as right or good universally in all circumstances. Suppose action 'A' is a good act because, in specific cases, it produces



maximum overall pleasure rather than pain. The same action ‘A’ might not produce maximum overall pleasure in a different circumstance. Accordingly, we would not consider it as a good act. So, a particular action might get different value judgments depending upon the context and situation. Murder, treason, corruption, cheating, lying cannot be outrightly discredited as wrong or something bad. They might produce maximum pleasure among the maximum number of people.

### Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Why do philosophers criticize Utilitarianism over its consequential nature?

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2. Why is Utilitarianism considered as relativistic?

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## 3.4 CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS

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Deontological ethics, unlike Utilitarianism, primarily emphasizes moral duties guided by pure reason. Utilitarianism, as we have seen above, tries to define that through the calculation of overall utility measured in terms of pleasure and pain. Immanuel Kant, the foremost advocate of deontological ethics, argues that moral rules or principles are ends-in-themselves. Performing duties according to those rules should not be for the sake of any other objectives, in other words, “duty for the sake of duty” and nothing else. Kant has explained this with the help of the distinction between “Hypothetical Imperatives” and “Categorical Imperatives”. Hypothetical imperatives are those “oughts” that an individual performs for the sake of achieving something s/he desires. For example, if I want to pass the exam with good marks, I ought to study hard. Or, if I wish not to be affected by the Corona Virus, I ought to maintain social distancing. The should-ness or oughtness of these actions depends upon the desires one has to achieve some or other goals. For Kant, the should-ness or oughtness used to define moral obligations cannot be subjective and vary with the change of an individual’s desires in life. They should be ‘*categorical*’ in nature; one must follow them irrespective of his/her desires. Categorical Imperatives or Practical Law should be unconditional, and they should not be followed because of reaching any other end, but because they themselves set ends. For example, no one should lie. In this example, lying is prohibited, not because it will harm others or break their trust, etc. but, in the context of Kantian categorical imperative,

lying is not permitted because it is bad in itself. The rule is no rational being should lie in any circumstance.

Maxims play a vital role in Kantian philosophy (Philosophy of Kant) in deciding the moral law. Kant's first maxim is to provide objectivity in an ethical rule as it is already being considered that subjective rules cannot be a moral law. The first maxim demands an individual to act on rules, which s/he can adhere to as a universal law. For example, you made a promise to your friend without any intention to keep it, and eventually, you broke the promise. The question here is, can you adhere to the idea that every friend/person in the world ought to break promises? If you cannot adhere to it, then you cannot consider it a maxim for the moral law. Thus you ought not to do it.

Similarly, people should not lie; they ought to speak the truth; people should not cheat, kill an innocent, etc. can be considered moral law and should be followed universally without breaking it. In addition to that, the will to fulfill these duties should not to achieve any other end but only to perform these duties and nothing else. One should not help a person because s/he needs some favour from that person or s/he loves helping people. In both cases helping is motivated by the subjective will. What if someone has no such intention to get a favour or someone does not love helping? Will helping be as obligatory on them as on persons with some subjective will? Kant opines that it will not. Thus, if help is considered a moral duty, people need to discharge it irrespective of whether they have any subjective element or not. They should fulfill their duties with the spirit of doing "duty for the sake of duty" and nothing else.

In this context, the primary question against Kant is that what if speaking truth, which everyone ought to adhere universally as a moral duty, will lead to the murder of an innocent person? Which one, telling the truth or saving an innocent human's life, may be considered as primary duty? Kantian ethics, in general, is not consequential. So, people might opine that one should not lie in any circumstance even if that leads to an innocent being's death. By discharging one's duty of not lying, one may uphold the moral law, but can we say that the person is not guilty of the murder? At least, s/he has participated in the event in such a way that it leads to the murder of an innocent person. So, it seems that Kantian deontology has not adequately addressed the problem when a person faces a moral dilemma.

Not considering the consequences of an action in formulating a moral law might be seen as a problem for this approach of ethics. We can understand the issue through the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Krishna was trying to convince Arjuna that it is his duty as a Kshatriya or member of the warrior caste to fight for a just cause even if that is against his own people. He should not worry about the consequences. On the other hand, Arjuna hesitated to wage war because he was foreseeing that war would result in huge loss of innocent human lives. He was foreseeing the consequences of war and considering it unjustified to act in a way that would lead to a massive loss of innocent lives.. The above example shows that there are occasions where we need to consider the relevant consequences an action might bring before making a judgment about whether to act that way or not. As human beings, we are limited and confined within many boundaries, and our 'situatedness' is one among them. We cannot objectively apply a moral principle to make a moral judgment or act in all life's different situations. Assessment of the situation and considering the relevant factors and relevant consequences of our actions are important for making a moral value judgment. Complete neutrality towards the consequences of actions might sometimes make our actions unethical.

Another point of criticism against Kantian deontology is the issue of motivation for doing an ethical act. People ought to discharge their duties only for the sake of fulfilling their obligations and nothing else. Kant has tried to prevent any element which will make an ethical act subjective. People might have different motivations for fulfilling their duties. Someone might love humanity thus, he helps people in need; someone might get some benefit by telling the truth; otherwise, he wouldn't have. Kant opines that we cannot consider these actions as ethical. It is because ethical principles cannot be subjective and depend on individual preferences. A person loves humanity; thus, he is fulfilling his duty of helping others in need. What about those who do not love humanity or act in that way? What about those people who are not getting any benefit from discharging their duty? Then, principally, they cannot be held responsible for not fulfilling their duties. Thus, to bring in a universal framework of ethics for all rational beings, Kant has tried to block these individual preferences for fulfilling one's duty. He argues that it is reasonable to do our duties only for the sake of duty and without any other motivation. Reason should be our primary motivational basis to act ethically. Kant finds love, sympathy, and relational acts as contingent, and we cannot consider actions inspired by these feelings as acts of goodwill. The question that remains here is that can human beings be so unaffected/neutral in different situations of their lives to make moral decisions only inspired by reason? How can a person consider his mother and a stranger as having the same value for him when both are drowning, and he is the only person who can save only one of them? Most Kantians would argue that the person can save his mother, but he should not make the decision based on the affiliations he has with his mother. The worth of two human lives should be seen on equal terms. By being rational, each and every human being is end-in-themselves, which comes from Kant's second maxim. But the problem remains the same – how far we, human beings, are competent to disregard our affiliations, relations, emotional attachments, sympathy, a contextual environment which, apart from reason, contributes to a large extent in our moral decision making.

Kant's second maxim has contributed a lot in shaping modern human rights discourse. It demands every individual to treat every other person, whether his/her own person or not, always as an end and never only as a mere means. This maxim secures the intrinsic worth of a person as the person has personhood. It will not be wrong to state that this 'personhood' in Kantian philosophy has mostly been defined based on a person's rationality. This maxim secures individuals from any exploitation and promotes treating with the will to do welfare for them, respect their rights, and avoid harming. Treating people always as an end will lead to the "Kingdom of Ends" which is the goal of Kant's third maxim.

Though this maxim talks about people's overall welfare in society, some unease is there regarding treating everyone as a mere end. We should not give punishment for the sake of society. Kant has rejected the Utilitarian argument for punishment as that would lead to treating criminals merely as an end for others' happiness. Kant argues that punishment is a concern of justice, and we should decide punishment, which is fitting for the crimes. So "eye for an eye" might be the suitable theory for the Kantian understanding of punishment. The question arises here is that what if the criminal is a victim of his or her situation? What if someone mistakenly murdered an innocent? Can we judge those situations through any other principle? Or, are we to punish them only based on the crime, they have done irrespective of their situation or context in which somebody had done the crime? These are the questions which lead us to consider that Kantian theory of ethics has not accommodated all the ethical issues.

### Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Define Categorical Imperatives.

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2. Discuss in brief the major criticisms against Kantian deontology.

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### 3.5 CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF VIRTUE ETHICS

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Utilitarianism and Kantian deontology revolve around the question - how to act morally or what makes an action good or bad? Virtue ethics advocates ask the question from ancient times, as Rachel puts it, “*what traits of character make someone a good person*” (Rachel 2012, p.157). Instead of finding out action-guiding principles, they delved into finding virtues that make a person good. Plato has identified virtues as something internal to human beings rather than something external of them. Human virtues reside in human beings. Utilitarianism and deontological ethics are trying to find out good and bad in actions in the form of moral obligations and in consequences of the action. Plato argues in *The Republic* that if individual beings are virtuous only, they will act in good ways. Both Plato and Aristotle have opined that the goodness of a human being cannot be determined by analyzing instances of actions. If it is a virtue, it should be habitual and constant in every action. We cannot consider a serial killer as a good person by observing one single act of goodness done by him. Other ethics theories are not so concerned about making a person good or cultivating virtues in individual beings. They seem to revolve around what considerations we should keep in our mind in making a moral decision, how we ought to act, and how to assess an act on and pass a moral judgment about whether the action is good or bad. Virtue ethics talks about different virtues that should be cultivated in human beings so that acting in good ways should be their habit and not ephemeral. Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) has argued that the concerns of virtue ethics have been disregarded in contemporary times, and those trying to advocate it seem to be misguided. We should again return to the approach that Greek philosophers have developed, especially Aristotle.

Plato has responded to how to be virtuous by saying that there should be harmony/ balance between different parts of the soul (Reason, Courage, and Temperance). Aristotle has tried to define harmony by stating that virtues are the midpoint of two vices – one is extreme, and the other is insufficient. He termed this midpoint as the

“Golden Rule.” So, saying that being courageous is a virtue means, in Aristotlean framework, to say that one should not be over-courageous, which will lead to recklessness, and one should not be coward as well. This understanding applies in all the list of virtues concerning human beings. Plato has tried to delve deep into this issue. For him to be virtuous the human soul needs to maintain a harmonious state where Reason, Courage, and Temperance are in concomitance. Plato would place this harmony as a condition to maintain the Aristotlean “Golden Rule”. Plato would say that once the psychic harmony is in place, people would act in ways that are good on a continuous basis.

The major criticism that comes up against this theory is its inability to explain why something should be considered a virtue. Why should we consider truthfulness as a virtue? Why are any of the virtues considered a virtue? In the case of Utilitarianism, they would readily point out why they would consider any action as good or bad. Advocates of Kantian deontology would also rely on their principles to pass a moral value judgment. But in the case of Virtue ethics, that explanation is imprecise. Thus, there is no substantial ground provided by this ethics approach on why we should consider kindness/courageous/truthfulness as a virtue. In addition to that, many people have argued that the virtues are not in-itself valuable, but they are valuable because either they help us in generating overall welfare in society (Utilitarian concern) or they help us in discharging our duties (Deontological concern). Like, we consider kindness to others is a virtue because by being kind to others, we maximize welfare in society. While many people subscribe to this view, Plato in *The Republic* has firmly argued that justice as a virtue is valuable for its own sake and for the consequences it brings as well.

Another objection to Virtue ethics is that this normative ethics approach has very little to guide when a person faces an ethical dilemma. For example, a person may face a dilemma between either telling the truth, which will hurt another person’s sentiments or being kind and compassionate by being silent. How would the individual choose to prioritize one virtue over the other in cases of conflict of two virtues?

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### 3.6 LET US SUM UP

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So far, in this unit we have tried to analyze different ethical approaches critically. At this juncture, we can say that no theory is perfect and beyond criticism. Every theory has its strength and has made its mark on the history of Philosophy. Contemporary developments in the discipline of ethics might not have been possible without these approaches. Criticisms are not being made and should not be made to vilify any theory. Criticisms show the problematic aspects of a theory and attempt to fulfill the lacunae inside concepts. Despite all the criticisms, no one would deny the positive contribution these theories have made in understanding the distinction between good and bad or right and wrong.

#### Check Your Progress IV

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. How is the concern of Virtue Ethics different from the other approaches of ethics?

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2. Discuss in brief the major criticisms against Virtue Ethics.

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### 3.7 KEY WORDS

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**Critical Appraisal** : To evaluate any concept/principle critically.

**Normative Ethics** : Moral philosophy about norm/rule-making in moral life. Some of the pertinent questions of this moral philosophy are; What are the moral principles? What is the basis to establish these moral principles/norms?

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### 3.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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### 3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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#### Check Your Progress I

1. Utilitarianism formulates utility as the basis for assessing an action, whether that is good or bad. Advocates of this theory have defined utility in terms of happiness. They provide the principle that if an action produces pleasure/happiness over pain/sorrow among the maximum number of people, then that action would be considered good otherwise, it would be regarded as bad.
2. The major difference between Utilitarianism and Deontology is that Utilitarianism states that we need to analyze the consequences of an action to determine whether the action is good or bad. On the other hand, deontology states that we need to examine the action in-itself in making a moral judgment about the action. Apart

from that, Utilitarianism is centred around the question of utility in terms of pleasure and pain. Deontological ethics revolves around the concept of duty irrespective of whether discharging one's duty produces pain or pleasure.

### Check Your Progress II

1. Utilitarianism is consequential because it gives priority to the consequences of an action in making an ethical evaluation of it. Whether an action/policy/rule is good or bad depends on how much pain or pleasure it produces as consequences. The charge against Utilitarianism is that this principle overlooks the factor that actions might be intrinsically good or bad. Actions might have value themselves. In addition to that, consequences would not always morally justify an action. For example, people might get happiness by harming/torturing an innocent person. But torturing or harming an innocent is in-itself bad.
2. The moral principle that Utilitarianism has provided is good if it produces maximum happiness among the maximum number of people; otherwise, it will be considered bad. Scholars have raised the question that if that is so, there will be no uniformity in making a moral judgment about an action. A particular action in one situation might be good because it might produce happiness over sorrow, but the same action in a different situation might be considered bad because there it has produced suffering over pleasure. So, good and bad is entirely situational and thus relativistic.

### Check Your Progress III

1. Kant formulates Categorical Imperatives in understanding moral obligations. Categorical imperatives are not dependent upon a person's desire or fulfill some other ends that are applicable for hypothetical imperatives. The nature of categorical imperatives is 'you ought to do it' irrespective of whether someone desires to do it or not. If moral law prescribes something as a duty, one should do it. Categorical imperatives are unconditional and without exceptions. One should not violate them in any condition.
2. One of the major criticisms against Kantian deontology is that this theory is not unambiguous in dealing with moral dilemmas. This theory is silent largely, or we can say not guiding us on questions like which duty should get priority, telling the truth or saving an innocent's life, if there is a conflict between two moral duties. Another criticism that comes up in a significant way against this theory is that Kant's categorical imperatives prevent us from considering any concerns for the consequences that my fulfillment of duty might bring. Sometimes we need to foresee the relevant implications of action; otherwise, many negative consequences might fall out from one single act of ours.

### Check Your Progress IV

1. Virtue Ethics, primarily, asks a completely different question from Utilitarianism and Deontological ethics. Instead of asking what makes an action good or bad, it asks the character traits that make a person good or bad. So, the primary aim of virtue ethics is different from the other two approaches of ethics. Another important difference is that Virtue ethics does not prioritize single instances of action to make a moral value judgment like the other two theories. It considers virtues as something constant (habitual). We actually cannot judge a person by observing one instance of doing good. He might be a serial offender, and he might have done that act of goodness by chance.

2. The major criticism that comes up against Virtue ethics is in the form of the question that why should consider virtues as a virtue at all. Why we ought to consider kindness or honesty as a virtue? Virtue ethics provides no precise answer to this question.



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