

UNIT 3

ANAYLYSIS OF HUMAN ACTION

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are:

- Ethics, as a science of morality, judges human conduct which is basically made up of human actions. So having a correct understanding of the notion of human act is the first aim of this unit.
- Secondly, this unit highlights the obstacles that could possibly obstruct the performance of a human act.
- Thirdly, it is very important to analyse the factors that generally influence the morality of human action.
- Lastly, this unit endeavours to comprehend the theories of determinism and indeterminism as they are closely associated with the analysis of human action.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Humans are said to be evaluative in nature. Whenever a person does something we find others analysing his/her behaviour and commenting that it was good, bad or at times indifferent. Ethics is said to be a philosophical treatise which studies human behaviour and tries to determine whether the act performed was morally right or wrong. It cannot content itself with simply registering facts; it attempts to reflect on the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of such facts, establish or reject them on a rational basis, understand their implications, draw relevant consequences and, above all, intuit their ultimate cause. There is a continuous effort made for studying our own moral beliefs and our moral conduct and striving to ensure that we, and the institutions we help to shape, live up to standards that are reasonable and morally based. This contributes towards establishing sound moral foundation on which people build their lives. Hence one can reasonably aver that Ethics represents a broad framework for determining a core value system one uses for our day to day existential situation.

The above discussion raises an essential question: How we judge certain actions as good or right whereas others are regarded as bad or wrong? Any attempt to provide an adequate answer to this query brings us to the analysis of a basic question: What is human action?

3.2 UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN ACT

Scholastic philosophy outlines a distinction between *Actus Hominis* and *Actus Humanus* i.e. 'Acts of Man/Human' and 'Human Acts' respectively. Not every act that a human being does is a typically human act. Human activities, like the circulation of blood, heart beat, over which normal people in general have no control are not classified as human acts. Such acts which are beyond the control of humans and those which they share in common with animals are called as 'Acts of humans'. Acts of humans, then, are involuntary and therefore, not morally responsible for them.

On the other hand a 'Human Act' is one which proceeds from knowledge and from consent of free will. Or in other words it is an act which emanates from the will with a knowledge of the end or goal to which the act leads. The Human act is to be distinguished from acts of humans which are performed without intervention of intellect and free will. An act is termed as distinctively a human act which is voluntary in character, that is, the human person under consideration could have done it differently if s/he had so willed or chosen. It is an act which is in some way under the control or direction of the will, which is proper to humans. Such an act is performed by a person deliberately and intentionally in order to realize some foreseen end/s. Thus one can rightly assert that a voluntary act proceeds from the will with the apprehension of the end sought, or, in other words, is put forth by the will solicited by the goodness of the object as presented to it by the intellect. Such acts, moreover, proceed from the will's own determination, without necessitation, intrinsic or extrinsic.

3.3 THE CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS OF HUMAN ACTS

Constituent elements of the human act refer to the inner causes or the constituting elements which generate a human person to undertake a certain act. The understanding of the human act indicates that there are two essential elements which constitute a human act: The Intellectual Element and The Volitive Element.

The Intellectual Element

Knowledge is one of the important qualities which distinguish humans from other sentient beings. Absolute truth in all situations and matters might be beyond human capabilities. But we humans can attain truth and that not all truths are relative are undeniable facts, as Epistemology will have established. The denial of such assertions only results in re-asserting them, by the very act itself. Universal scepticism and absolute relativism are found to be self-contradictory and as such are philosophically untenable doctrines.

The faculty of willing can make a choice for something and seek it only when it is first known. This act of knowing is undertaken by the faculty of the intellect. The human act is voluntary when its different elements and its implications are sufficiently known by the agent or the doer

prior to the operation of the will. This process of knowing entails certain important conditions: (i) adequate knowledge of the aspired object, (ii) attention to the action by which the particular object is to be pursued and (iii) judgement on the value of the act.

The fulfilment of the above elements is found to be essential, for, human person cannot consciously and freely will something without having proper knowledge about what the object one is concerned with and therefore conscious of the act one is to perform in order to achieve the desired aim. It is also required that one evaluates the action undertaken in its concrete nature as a desirable good or an undesirable evil. Such an appraisal includes judgement on the moral or ethical value of the act.

Furthermore, the goodness or the badness of a particular human act is judged only under those of its aspects which are sufficiently known. For instance a person who robs and kills a person not knowing him to be his brother, he is guilty of criminal injury but not culpable of offence of fratricide.

However, from the above discussion one should not presuppose that we have full knowledge of the act and its implications every time we undertake a human act. There is still room left for mistakes. What we affirm here is that with right effort the person can have sufficient knowledge of the object and its other considerations which are essential for the making of a human act.

The Volitive Element

Another important characteristic which sets apart the human person from animals is that of voluntariness or what we commonly designate as free will. It is the task of the intellect to conceptualize the good, to propose it to the will as something desirable, and to judge the suitability of the means in its attainment. This awareness which is based on certain amount of reflection is very important in the analysis of the human act. It can occur in varying degrees depending on which, they can affect the morality of the act. However, just this awareness is insufficient for the production of the human act. It is required that the presented good is willed freely by the person. The volitive dimension points that the will can freely make a choice of the concrete object in which the good is sought. Thus when we hold a person morally responsible for his/her action, we assume that the act was done freely, knowing and willingly. The idea of responsibility would seem then to connote and presuppose that of free will.

If a human person for some valid reason is not free to choose what he/she would like according to his/her insight and will, but has to act against one's will, his/her action is not free and consequently such an act cannot be designated as a human act. For instance a mentally disturbed person feels compelled to do something again and again but he/she is conscious of the object one is concerned with and also the end of the action with which the object is pursued, yet such an act will not be voluntary because its execution is done with psychic compulsion and not with free will. So an act to be a free act and consequently a human act, it is to be done without any internal or external compulsion. The degree of compulsion determines to a large extent the voluntariness of the action and consequently the culpability of the person. For instance a high degree of compulsion may almost render the act involuntary and subsequently reduce the degree of culpability.

One must note that anything that is an object of the will, we call the thing willed. But not everything that is willed is necessarily an effect of the will; for e.g. the setting of a house on fire which is not caused, but desired by someone, is something willed but is not the effect of the will. Thus when what is willed is both the object and the effect of the will, we call it voluntary.

One can conclude the discussion on the two constitutive elements of the human act: intellectual and volitive, by affirming the essential union of the knowledge and will in the generation of the human act.

Process involved in a Voluntary Act

Very often a voluntary act, performed by an agent knowingly and freely in order to realize some foreseen end, is not a spontaneous reaction. It involves a dynamic process. Voluntary action has its advent in the mind. It begins with a feeling of want or a craving or a desire which is either real or ideal. Such an impulse, though to a certain extent painful, is mixed with pleasure which arises from the anticipation of satisfaction of this craving by the attainment of the desired object. The person also has awareness of the means that are required to attain the proper object. In a simple action, where there is no conflict of motives, the choice is easily made and the desired action is performed. However, in our daily course of living many of our actions are of a complex nature which often involves a conflict of motives thereby causing difficulty in the matter of choice that eventually delays decision and the performance of the act. Hence, when the self is confronted with divergent and competing motives the mind experiences a challenge generated by conflict of motives. In order to tackle this, the mind deliberates on the merits and demerits of the different courses of action that are available. After weighing the advantages and disadvantages the mind chooses a particular motive and a particular action to achieve the end. This act of selection of one motive to the exclusion of others results in decision. The decided motive is subjectively evaluated as the strongest motive among the others. The decision phase is often converted immediately into action and the decision is actualised. However at times the decision might be postponed for a future fulfilment in which case there is scope for resolution. Resolution refers to the capacity of remaining committed to the decided motive. The state of decision or resolution gives way to the actual performance of a bodily action which is technically designated as a human act. The undertaking of the external bodily action produces changes in the external world, certain of these are foreseen consequences whereas many others are unforeseen consequences.

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 human action? Explain the relationship between the intellectual element and the volitive element in the performance of human action.

coercion they can be overcome by a committed effort. As such imputability of acts from habit increases or decreases depending upon the effort exerted.

Fear: It is defined as the shrinking back of the mind on account of an impending evil considered to be difficult to avoid or even impossible at times. Fear may be grave or mild according to whether it is caused by a grave evil whose avoidance is rather difficult if not impossible, or only by a mild evil which can be easily avoided. Fear is characterised as highly grave when it exercises great deterrence on an average person for e.g. fear of killing. Fear is relatively grave when the threatened evil is generally considered as objectively slight but it scares a particular person subjectively depending on the person's emotional disposition. Fear hampers the use of reason and as such destroys voluntariness. Fear in general does not fully destroy the voluntariness of action but merely reduces its gradation and as such usually lessens its culpability. Only in extreme cases when the highly grave fear totally impairs the two constitutive elements the act done out of fear may be regarded as involuntary.

3.5 FACTORS DETERMINING THE MORALITY OF HUMAN ACTS

Analyzing the morality of the human act is said to be a complex enterprise since it is affected by so many conditions which are within and without. Most of the moralists agree that to judge the goodness or badness of any particular human act, three elements must be weighed from which every act derives its morality. They are: the **Object** of the act, the **Circumstances** surrounding the act, and the **End** or **Intention** that the one performing the act has in mind.

The Object of the Human Act

It is that which the action of its very nature tends to produce. Or in other words it refers to the effect which an action primarily and directly causes. It is necessarily the result of the act without taking into account the circumstances or the end. For example the object of setting fire to hut of a slum-dweller is to burn whereas the end might be revenge. The object is usually regarded as the primary factor for moral judgement of a human act. From the viewpoint of object an act is generally classified as morally good, bad or indifferent. For a morally good act, the object of it must be good.

The Circumstances contextualising the Human Act

These include all the particulars of the concrete human action which are capable of affecting its morality. They are such things as the person involved, the time, the place, the occasion, which are distinct from the object, but can change or at times even completely alter its moral tone. Circumstances can make an otherwise good action better for e.g. giving food to a person who is almost dying of starvation. They can make good an act which is otherwise indifferent, for e.g. sitting with a person who is feeling lonely. But they can also make worse an act which is evil in its object for e.g. robbing a beggar from his/her only meal of the day. Since all human actions occur in a particular context i.e. at a certain time and at a certain place, the circumstances must always be considered in evaluating the moral quality of any human act.

The End or the Intention of the Agent in performing a Human Act

The end or intention of a human act is the purpose that prompts one to perform such an act. Every human act, no matter how trivial, is done with some intention. It is the reason for which

the agent performs a particular act. It is the effect that the agent subjectively wills in his/her action. At times it can so happen that the intention of the agent coincides with the object of the human act, for e.g. offering a glass of water to a thirsty person to quench thirst. However at other times both of them might be different. For e.g. a captured spy may commit suicide in order to safeguard the secrets of the country. A human act to be morally good the agent or doer must have a good intention—he must want to accomplish something that is good in one way or another.

The end too can affect the morality of the human act just as circumstances do. A good intention can make better an act which is good in its object, for e.g. helping a poor person to start a small business with the intention of making him independent. Also the end can worsen a act which is already evil in its object, for e.g. killing the father, who is the only breadwinner in the family, so that his children might be on the street. To a great extent many of the actions that we do which otherwise might be indifferent morally in themselves, but they receive their moral quality from the intention behind them.

According to the moralists a human act is said to be morally good when it is good in its object, circumstances and also in the intention, for it is believed that an action is good when each of these three factors is conformed to order (*Bonum ex integra causa*). If even one of these determinants is contrary to order, the action will be bad, at least in part (*Malum ex quocumque defectu*).

3.6 DETERMINISM AND INDETERMINISM

The question of free will or human freedom in the matter of making a moral choice, has been an issue which is discussed and deliberated by philosophers down the centuries. And the complexity of problem makes it rather difficult to take a stand in the category of 'Either Or.' The problem is formulated thus: Determinism versus Indeterminism. Immanuel Kant has given a sound articulation to this issue in his, *Critique of Practical Reason*. He states thus: *The concept of freedom is the stone of stumbling for all empiricists, but at the same time the key to the loftiest practical principles for critical moralists, who perceive by its means that they must necessarily proceed by a rational method.*

Determinism

Determinism is a theory which explains that all human action is conditioned entirely by preceding events, and not by the faculty of the Will. In philosophy, the theory is based on the metaphysical principle that an uncaused event is rather impossible. The success of scientists in discovering causes of certain behaviour and in some cases effecting its control tends to support this doctrine. The deterministic view seems to be very much at home with the scientific temper because the subject matter of any science rests on the principle of causality which asserts that every event has a cause and the aim of science is to find a causal explanation for anything that happens within the domain of that science. Accordingly one can enumerate different categories of determinism based on a particular science. We have the theory of **Physical determinism** stating that human interaction can be reduced to relationships between biological, chemical, or physical entities. This has its origin in the Atomism of Democritus. **Theological determinism** is the theory, which posits that there is God, omnipotent and omniscient, who is determining all

that humans will do, either by knowing their actions in advance or by decreeing their actions in advance. German philosopher Leibniz with his theory of monads advocated a form of theological determinism. He averred that the monads (the simple, indivisible elements) seek their own perfection through a 'preestablished harmony' instituted by God 'the Prime Monad'. **Psychological determinism** posits that we all possess certain mental qualities which govern our life. Freud, with his psychoanalytic theory, expressed a form of psychological determinism that all we do is due to mental factors some of which we are conscious but most of them are beyond our conscious states. **Biological determinism** is the idea that all behaviour, belief, and desire are fixed by our genetic endowment.

In summary we can say that in general, determinism is a doctrine which in some way holds the stance that there is no such thing as free choice for any choice that we make is already conditioned by a set of causes or is settled prior to our act of choosing. As such, the person cannot be held morally accountable or responsible for his/her act.

Indeterminism

Indeterminism is a theory, though not denying the influence of behavioural patterns and certain extrinsic forces on human actions, insists on the reality of free will or the capacity of the humans to make a free choice. This view asserts that humans are an exception to the rigid determinism that occurs in nature. Indeterminists accept the principle of causality but aver that human free will or human choices are not totally bound by the causal law. Some of the proponents of this view try to seek support for their claim by appealing to the Physicist Werner Heisenberg's 'Principle of Indeterminacy' which shows that randomness in the universe is compatible with science. He questions whether it is possible to determine an objective framework through which one can distinguish cause from effect. But one must also note that according to some other thinkers Heisenberg's principle has little to do with choice or free will. Attempts have been also made to use the indeterminism of the latest theory of quantum mechanics, which postulates irreducible physical indeterminacy, to buttress the claim that human actions to a great extent are grounded in free will.

Efforts have been made to reconcile free will with determinism by introducing the theory of soft determinism. This doctrine posits humans are free from external coercion and as such are undetermined but they cannot make a free choice against their individual characters. In other words it asserts that a person is free physically but psychologically he/she is determined. However this reconciliatory tone too has been questioned: if a person is internally or psychologically determined can we really hold that the person is free?

Another theory, which so to say strives to provide a mediating proposal to the problem of determinism and free will, is that of self-determinism. It accepts the causality principle and affirms that nothing can happen without a cause. Hence our so called free acts are also caused but they are caused by the very person as a self-governing or free agent, so that agent could have acted otherwise and freely choose not to do so. Self-determinist believes that though humans are strongly influenced by the motives and as such are called to deliberate between them, still they are not necessitated by them either way, they can make their own choices.

In concluding this section on determinism and indeterminism one has to note that the position or the view one holds will obviously affect one's interpretation of moral responsibility or accountability.

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) Explain the factors that affect the morality of human action.

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2) Comment on the theories of determinism and indeterminism in the context of the analysis of human action.

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3.7 LET US SUM UP

Human action is explained as an act which proceeds from prior knowledge and free will. It differs from 'acts of humans' which result without the intervention of intellect and free will and as such normally they are beyond human control. From the understanding of human action we deduce the two constituent principles viz, volitive and intellectual which are essential in its constitution. The human action is not a spontaneous reaction but rather a gradual process beginning in the mind and ending by producing certain external consequences. In this process it encounters certain obstacles which obstruct the imputability of the agent performing the act. The morality of the human action depends on three main determinants: object, circumstances and intention. The theories of determinism and indeterminism are closely related to the analysis of human action.

3.8 KEY WORDS

Preestablished Harmony: It is a term from art which is used by Leibniz. It refers to the order in the monads that is installed by God in advance in such a way that each subsequent state is a consequence of the preceding one.

Universal Skepticism: It is elucidated as the philosophical doctrine which doubts that we can have any certitude in knowledge

Fatricide: It is defined as deliberate killing of ones sister or brother.

3.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. Human act is elucidated as that act which an agent performs with knowledge and free will. It is an act which results from the integration of reason and will and so is not determined. The act is within the control of the agent and therefore it is distinguished from 'acts of humans' over which the agent has no power, for e.g. digestion. The intellectual and the volitive elements functions in co-operation in the production of human action. The faculty of willing can make a choice freely for a particular alternative only when the

intellect provides adequate knowledge of the aspired object, indicates the action by which the object is to be pursued and also provides some sort of judgement on the value of the act. Therefore when we hold a person accountable or responsible for a specific action we presume that the concerned act was performed knowingly, willingly and freely. Any sort of compulsion reduces the voluntariness of the action and its eventual culpability. At times if the degree of coercion is extremely high then it can even render an act involuntary.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. Moralists have outlined three main factors which, to a great extent, define the morality of a human act. These determinants include: the Object of the act, the Circumstances surrounding the act, and the End or Intention that the one performing the act has in mind. Object refers to the effect that an action primarily and directly causes. This is considered as the primary factor for moral judgement. Circumstances include all the particulars, surrounding the human action, which have somehow the capacity to affect its morality. The end or intention refers to the reason or the purpose for which the agent chooses to perform a particular action. So while judging the morality of a particular action all these three factors are to be evaluated not in isolation but in an integral framework.
2. A voluntary human action is believed to be performed by an agent with prior knowledge and free will. Is human will really free? This is a question that is deliberated by the ethical thinkers for a long time without arriving at an exhaustive solution which is agreed by all without any reservation. The determinists, basing themselves on the metaphysical principle that uncaused event is impossible, appear to be convinced that human action is wholly controlled by preceding events. Their stand is rather strengthened by the scientific temper which is primarily based on the principle of causality which leaves no room for any chance or 'free' happening. On the other hand indeterminists, without denying the principle of causality, aver that humans are specifically blessed with the capacity of free will and that their choices are not totally bound by the causal law. Self determinism seems to be a midway path between the two extremes. It affirms that nothing happens without a cause. Even our so called free acts are caused by the very person as a self-governing or free agent who chooses to act in that particular way.