

ESSENCE OF ETHICS

The term 'essence' means core, fundamental nature or quintessence. Therefore, the essence of the subject Ethics will mean its fundamental nature or its core. The fundamental nature of a subject and its core are given in its definition. Different schools of philosophy define ethics differently.

Ethics evaluates human actions and passes judgment on their goodness or badness. But for judging human actions as right or wrong, criteria are necessary. Criteria used for evaluating actions are also known as **moral standards**. Many writers consider the moral standards or criteria used to evaluate human actions as the essence of morality.

Broad areas within Ethics

The themes which are treated in Ethics include:

- (i) Standards of conduct;
- (ii) Principles by which ethical problems may be solved;
- (iii) Adequacy of the values that shape the world;
- (iv) Moral aspects of relations between human beings;
- (v) Detached reflection on the assumptions and presumptions of moral life;
- (vi) Virtue ethics or ethics of individual character and
- (vii) Ethics applicable in various aspects of life.

Any discussion of the essence of ethics has to accord prominence to moral criteria which are used to judge human actions. Ethics as a discipline examines whether particular human actions are moral, immoral or without a moral dimension.

DETERMINANTS OF ETHICS

This moral perspective is the most vital determinant of ethical behaviour. To what extent the practice of an ideal action can or should be called 'ethical' or 'unethical' depends upon:

1. Individual personality values,
2. Social ethics,
3. Interactive situations, and
4. The level of knowledge and understanding.

The scholars in the area of ethical philosophies have examined the purpose of human action. The Epicureans, the stoics, the hedonists, the Marxists and the humanists all have their respective arguments to distinguish moral good from moral evil. In the search for a criterion to assess the goodness or badness of human actions, the various schools of thought or moral philosophy have advanced their respective positions. They have been called institutionist's utilitarian's, rationalists and scholastics. The **determinants** of human morality or human ethics can vaguely be conceptualized and listed as under:

1. Object of a human action.
2. Circumstances under which the human action takes place.
3. The end purpose of human action.
4. The consequences of the moral actions, singly and cumulatively producing results.
5. The double effect of human actions in which they are forced to act or respond in a willy-nilly manner.

These determinant factors of ethics have taken the scholars into various directions to examine the **multiple dimensions of ethical behaviour** in human history. There are seven major ethical theories in western moral philosophy and their essence can be outlined or highlighted as under:

1. **Utilitarianism:** The idea that we always ought to act so as to maximize the sum total of welfare in the universe.
2. **Egoism:** The idea that we always ought to act so as to maximize the sum total of our own welfare.
3. **Deontological Ethics:** According to which there are duties or prohibitions, binding upon the agent, irrespective of the consequences of following them.
4. **The Ethics of rights:** According to which each moral subject has certain rights that no one is entitled to violate, no matter how urgent this may seem.
5. **Virtue Ethics:** According to which the most basic question in ethics is not what we ought to do, but what kind of persons we ought to be.
6. **Feminist Ethics:** According to which women and men tend to think differently about moral and practical problems and according to which an assumed female way of thinking deserves particular attention.
7. **Environmental or Ecological Ethics?** According to which not only human beings and other sentient beings have moral status, but also nature itself. We have duties to preserve nature, irrespective of the consequences for sentient beings of doing so.

These moral theories of ethical action explore the **dimensions** of ethics as a criterion for judging something seemingly 'right', in contrast to what is apparently 'wrong'. A civil servant, as a person, has a moral duty to be honest, neutral, incorruptible, sincere and self-sacrificing. He should have a consistent set of principles to justify his action to himself, to law and to other members of society. The moral theories can be formulated with or without any reference to God or religion.