

ETHICS AND HUMAN INTERFACE

Essence, determinants and consequences of Ethics in Human actions

Meaning and definitions

The term 'ethics' corresponds to the Greek word *ethica*. Ethica is derived from the word *ethos* meaning 'character', 'customs', 'usage' or 'habits'. Ethics has been described as a 'moral philosophy'. The word 'moral' comes from the Latin word *mores* which signifies customs or habits. Conduct is the interpreter of character. The character of a man finds its expression in and through his conduct. The conduct of a person springs out of, and expresses, his/her character, and is good or bad. Hence, Ethics may also be defined as the *science of character as expressing itself in right or wrong conduct or action*. Ethics discusses men's voluntary acts, their habits and customs, or in other words, their characters, the principles on which they habitually act and considers what it is that constitutes the rightness or wrongness of those principles.

There are some *ideals* in life. These ideals provide us some standard of judgment by which we say that one form of conduct is *better* than the other. Ethics is defined as the *science or general study of the ideals involved in human life*.

William Lillie defines Ethics as the *normative science of the conduct of human beings living in societies*. This definition says, *firstly*, that ethics is a science, *i.e.*, it gives us systematic knowledge about a particular set of related events or objects. *Secondly*, ethics is a normative science, because it does not merely describe the standards by which we judge, it is also concerned with the validity or truth of these standards. *Thirdly*, ethics deals with the human conduct; and conduct is "a collective name for voluntary actions." A voluntary action is a willful action, which a man could have done differently if he had so chosen. Ethics, therefore, deals with human actions, and not with actions of lower animals. Ethics is confined to the study of conduct of human beings living in the societies. Without social background, a human being would have not been a real human being capable of taking right and wrong actions.

Ethics, as a science of morality, discusses the rightness and wrongness of human actions. Here 'actions' mean 'voluntary actions'. Therefore, Ethics discusses the nature of voluntary actions, the distinction between voluntary and non-voluntary actions, and other related topics, *e.g.* desire, motive, intention etc.

Ethics is primarily concerned with moral judgments or the judgments of right and wrong. Moral judgment refers to the *moral standard* by which we judge actions. The question of moral standard is intimately related to the question of the *ultimate end* or the *highest good*. The

actions which are Conducive to this moral ideal are good or right, and those that do not conform to it are wrong or bad. Ascertainment of the moral ideal or ultimate end is the business of Ethics. Different thinkers have laid down different moral ideals. According to some, the moral ideal is a *Law*; to some others it is *pleasure* or *happiness*; to some it is *duty for duty's sake*; and to some again it is *perfection* or *self-realisation*. The business of Ethics is to explain these ideals and to determine which one is the best and acceptable.

The consciousness of right and wrong is accompanied by the consciousness of 'oughtness', *duty* or *moral obligation*. When we are aware of something which is right, we also know that it is our duty to do what is right. **Kant says that there is no meaning in 'right' unless it involves the 'ought'**. Thus the ideas of obligation, or duty and rights come within the scope of Ethics.

Ethics deals with moral judgment which leads to the questions as to which is the real subject of moral judgment, what should be the object of moral judgment, and what is the nature of the faculty of moral judgment.

Every science has certain fundamental postulates. **Ethics as a science has also certain fundamental postulates**, viz-, Personality, Reason, and Freedom of will. Ethics, therefore, concerns itself with the discussion of these postulates.

Conscience is another name of the moral faculty. Ethics cannot remain indifferent to the discussion of the nature of conscience and different theories relating to it.

Man has freedom of will and, therefore, man has to take the moral responsibility of his actions. A wrong-doer is responsible for his wrong deeds, and he should be punished for wrongdoing. Punishment is ethically justified. Ethics, thus, deals with punishment and its different theories.

Though Ethics has a definite range of subject matters for its discussion, yet its primary aim is to attempt a definition of the highest good of man. In this attempt Ethics has indirectly to deal with several problems which are psychological, philosophical, sociological and political in nature. The psychological problems with which Ethics is concerned are those of the nature of voluntary actions, springs of action and freedom of will. The philosophical problems are those of the real nature of human personality, man's place in the universe, freedom of will, immortality of the soul etc. The sociological problem in Ethics is that relating to the relation between individual and society; and the political problems are those of the relation between the individual and the state and the moral basis of the state.

Right and Wrong

When we pass moral judgment on the actions of a man, we generally use the terms right and wrong. Ethics has been defined as the science of rightness and wrongness of conduct.

The term '**right**' is derived from the Latin '*rectus*' which means *straight* or *according to rule*. When an action is said to be right, it means that it conforms to the rule or law. The term 'wrong' is related to the word 'wring' which means 'twisted', i.e., not according to rule. Rightness

or wrongness of an action consists in its conformity with the rule or not. Right action means that which is in conformity with the *moral law*. Wrong action, on the other hand, is an action which does not conform to the moral law. It is thus evident that the notions of 'right' and 'wrong' have a special reference to rule or law.

The word 'right' and 'wrong' are used of actions that are in some way *fitting to their circumstances*. The fittingness of a right action often appears to consist in its conformity to some rule. It is with reference to the moral law that an action is judged to be right or wrong.

Every law presupposes and *end* which is realised by it. The end that is realised by the moral law is called the *good*. Therefore, the right action is what subserves the supreme end of life or the highest good; and wrong action is what is opposed to this end. The notion of 'right' is thus subordinate to 'good'. An action is right if it is a means to the good.

Sciences are usually classified into two groups—

- (1) The group of theoretical, positive, natural or descriptive sciences, and
- (2) The group of normative, appreciative or regulative sciences.

Positive sciences are those which seek to discover the origin of things, to trace the line of their development, and to discover the actual order of thing. Physics, Psychology etc., belong to the group of positive sciences, Psychology analyses the processes of thinking, feeling, willing and other mental phenomena with a view to establishing universal or general principles. Psychology describes the mental processes as they are without any reference to an ideal or standard. Psychology never concerns itself with the worth or value of the mental facts, normative sciences on the other hand, judge the value of the facts terms of an ideal. *Normative sciences are concerned not with factual judgments, but with judgments of what ought to be. Ethics is a normative, science. It is concerned with judgment of value or what ought to be. Ethics is the 'science of the ideals in conduct'.*

Ethics seeks to determine the nature of the norm or ideal or standard, and seeks to enquire into the fittingness of human actions to this ideal. Ethics is not concerned with giving a mere description of human conduct. It is primarily concerned with what *ought to be* the right type of conduct. Ethics is connected, not with judgment of fact, but with judgment of value. Hence Ethics is a normative science.

Salient aspects of ethics in public administration

1. **Maxim of Legality and Rationality:** An administrator will follow the law and rules that are framed to govern and guide policies and decisions.
2. **Maxim of Responsibility and Accountability:** An administrator would not hesitate to accept responsibility for his decision and actions. He would hold himself morally responsible for his actions and for the use of his discretion while making decisions. Moreover, he would be willing to be held accountable to higher authorities of governance and even to the people who are the ultimate beneficiaries of his decisions and actions.

3. **Maxim of Work Commitment:** An administrator would be committed to his duties and perform his work with involvement, intelligence and dexterity. As Swami Vivekanand observed: *"Every duty is holy and devotion to duty is the highest form of worship."* This would also entail a respect for time, punctuality and fulfillment of promises made. Work is considered not as a burden but as an opportunity to serve and constructively contribute to society.
4. **Maxim of Excellence:** An administrator would ensure the highest standards of quality and administrative decisions and actions and would not compromise with such standards just because of convenience or complacency. In a competitive international environment, an administrative system should faithfully adhere to the imperatives of Total Quality Management (TQM).
5. **Maxim of Fusion:** An administrator would rationally bring about a fusion of individual, organizational and social goals to help evolve a unison of ideals and imbibe in his behaviour a commitment to such fusion. In situation of conflicting goals, a concern for ethics should govern the choices made.
6. **Maxim of Responsiveness and Resilience:** An administrator would respond effectively to the demands and challenges from the external as well as internal environment of which the administrative system is a part. He would adapt to environmental transformations and yet sustain the ethical norms of conduct. In situations of deviation from the prescribed ethical norms, the administrative system would show resilience and bounce back into the accepted ethical mould at the earliest opportunity.
7. **Maxim of Utilitarianism:** While making and implementing policies and decisions, an administrator will ensure that these lead to the greatest good (happiness, benefits) of the greatest number.
8. **Maxim of Compassion:** An administrator without violating the prescribed laws and rules, would demonstrate compassion for the poor, the disabled and the weak while using his discretion in making decisions. At least he would not grant any benefits to the stronger sections of society only because they are strong and would not deny the due consideration to the weak, despite their weakness.
9. **Maxim of National Interest:** Though universalistic in orientation and liberal in outlook, a civil servant, while performing his duties, would keep in view the impact of his action on his nation's strength and prestige. The Japanese, the Koreans, the Germans and the Chinese citizens (including civil servants), while performing their official roles, have at the back of their mind a concern and respect for their national interest. This automatically raises the level of service rendered and the products delivered by the civil service.
10. **Maxim of Justice:** Those responsible for formulation and execution of policies and decisions of governance, would ensure that respect is shown to the principles of equality, equity, fairness, impartiality and objectivity and no special favours are doled out on the criteria of status, position, power, class, caste or wealth.

11. **Maxim of Transparency:** An administrator will make decisions and implement them in a transparent manner so that those affected by decisions and those who wish to evaluate their rationale, will be able to understand the reasons behind such decisions and the sources of information on which these decisions stand.
12. **Maxim of Integrity:** An administrator would undertake an administrative action on the basis of honesty and not use his power, position and discretion to serve his personal interest and the illegitimate interests of other individual or groups.

PUBLIC ETHICS: THE SARC PERSPECTIVE

The Fourth Report of the **Second Administrative Reforms Commission** on Ethics in Government has dealt with it in a holistic and practical manner. The Commission has defined Ethics as “*a set of standards that society places on itself and which help to guide behaviour, choices and actions.*” The Commission goes on to add that it “is painfully aware that standards do not by themselves ensure ethical behaviour, that requires a culture of integrity. The crux of ethical behaviour does not lie in bold words and expressions enshrined as standards, but in their adoption in action, in sanctions against their violations, in putting in place competent disciplinary bodies to investigate allegations of violations and impose sanctions quickly in promoting a culture of integrity.”

Integrity, apart from financial integrity, also means intellectual integrity which does not permit the chasm or dichotomy between words and action, between profession and practice. All this, we believe, emphasise the role of individuals and citizens and institutions meant to tackle these issues. It is unfortunate that many institutions, as provided under our Constitution, to facilitate the working of democracy, have been either neglected or denigrated, and hence have lost their vigour. They have to be enabled to regain their resilience and vitality to cope with tasks entrusted to them creatively and without fear of favour. We can make reference to the approach of the Commission in the context of the Indian experience so far. The Commission lays down the ethical framework in politics, in public life, for ministers, legislators, for civil servants, for regulators, and also for judiciary. The aim should be to strengthen the anti-corruption laws and measures. There is need for ensuring confiscation of illegally acquired wealth and prohibition of ‘benami transactions’, and protection of whistleblowers. All this necessitates fresh legislation which depends on the will power of the political masters. The immunity enjoyed by legislators should not be in respect of criminal acts. Serious economic offences have received attention, besides the streamlining of many procedural matters. The Commission’s chapter on social infrastructure is important, as it deals with citizens’ initiatives, role of media, social audit and building of consensus. Then, the various aspects of systemic reforms which comprise many aspects including reducing of discretion simplification, accessibility, monitoring, audit, practical vigilance on corruption, intelligence gathering are discussed. Recommendations about some specific sector have been made. The other chapters of the report deal with protection of honest civil servants, need for international cooperation in tackling corruption and the vexed problem of relationship between the political executive and permanent civil service.

The political and civil service relationship when it gets distorted can wreak havoc on public interest. It is not possible within the compass of an article to comment in detail or analyse the recommendations of the Commission. As regards some recommendations, there can be a different viewpoint. Many facets will continue to be discussed and improved upon. But substantial work has been accomplished by the Commission. It is for the government now to initiate effective steps, by building consensus across the political spectrum or take a bold plunge in the matter which does not brook any delay as the faith of the public is fast eroding, and this is dangerous for democracy itself ?

While the strengthening of laws and institutions, political and electoral reforms, putting in place fresh innovations and stress on honest and sincere enforcement of the rule of law are important, it is the ethical ambience in society and moral fabric which are the ultimate determinants. It is this which will provide the glue of cohesion to any society and moral legitimacy to government of men which passing aberrations cannot shake. As Senator Paul H Douglas said in his well-known lectures on ethical dimensions and considerations in governance in Harvard University with reference to the US at that time: "Since the state is but the individual writ large, perhaps the disclosures of the past years may reawaken within us a sense of our individual failure to live up to standards we inwardly cherish. The faults we see in the government are often the reflection of our moral failures. All this may dawn upon us, so that we will not only reform government but also ourselves. If it does, the regenerative power of democracy and of human spirit will have another great victory in the continual moral struggle which goes on within each of us and within society." This also rings true of contemporary India.

Institutions and laws are not self-operating. They depend on the individuals who operate them. It is they who have to take a decision or make a choice. This discretion, this power to take a decision, is a trust placed in public officials, political and elected, or appointed. They may be faced with doubts and misgivings. Mahatma Gandhi gave a mantra or talisman for decision-making in our day-to-day work. It is well-known but deserves repetition as it is equally relevant in the trickiest of situations. Ethics does not remain ambivalent or amorphous but a guiding star.

Gandhi said: *I want to give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step contemplated is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away.*

Most scriptures emphasise the moral imperative: "Do unto others what you want to be done to you." Is it not a safe guide? The US President of Thomas Jefferson also provided a guideline for men concerned with public affairs: "Whenever you are to do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself how you would act were all the world looking at you, and act accordingly?" Another writer has added: "And if similar circumstances are there I shall publicly say that I would do it again."