CHAPTER II

NATURE OF ETHICS

Generally ethics is defined as the normative science of conduct of human beings. There is another name of ethics that is moral philosophy. The terms "moral" and "ethical" are often used as equivalent to "right" or "good" and as opposed to "immoral" and "unethical". Both these terms are related to a word meaning disposition or custom. One difference between the two terms is that the word "moral" derived from the Latin word "mores" means custom, and it gives importance on customary ways of judging human conduct. And the word "ethics" derived from Greek word "ethos" means custom but it gives importance on individual character. Now we treat ethics as a branch of philosophy, it is moral philosophy or philosophical thinking about morality, moral problems and moral judgment.

Distinction between a moral philosopher and a moralist

Confusion arises about moral philosopher and a moralist or an act of moralizing while distinguishing the two. A moralist engages himself in reflection of moral argument or discussion. Moralists acquire knowledge to guide people in practicing right conduct or the art of living of good life. Such an act may be defined as moralizing. This act of moralizing is not confined to the student of ethics or to moral philosopher. The moralizer acquires his material from experience of life rather than from text book of ethics. Generally, he is known as sage or wise man with an inborn insight of such
matter. Buddha and Gandhi are two examples of moralizer to be quoted here.

On the other hand a moral philosopher deals with the basic questions of ethics. He analyses the terms used by the moralizer in moral judgment and tries to find out the similarities and differences of these terms. In a simple way we can say that a moralist is interested in ethics and a moral philosopher is interested in meta ethics. Though we may say that there is no need for a moral philosopher to engage himself in moralizing or there may be moralizer without doing moral philosophy, but we should not leave them as such. Because of link between moral philosopher and a moralist is perceptible. W. D. Hudson in his book "Modern Moral Philosophy” described the link between moral philosophy and moral discourse. According to Hudson, a moral philosopher needs to know as much as possible about what is going on in first order moral discourse. It is difficult to be a good moral philosopher without any knowledge of what is practically going on. The long experience of a moralist is very much helpful for a moral philosopher.

It is also worth mentioning that the knowledge of ethics or moral philosophy has a great value for a moralizer. Though without any knowledge of moral philosophy one may make himself a successful moral educator but with the help of moral philosophy he may establish his ideas logically and systematically. A moralizer with his logical analysis and systematic knowledge may be more helpful for a society. W. D. Hudson has explained
about a moralizer with an example in his book “Modern Moral Philosophy”

When a team is playing football badly, some better players are required but not more people who only know the rules of football. Similarly our society needs not moral philosophers but wiser moralizers.

**Origin of morality**

But before going to discuss on moral philosophy in details, it is necessary to know what ethics is in a proper sense. Now to find out the answer we should go back to the origin of morality. Of course we can not answer quickly to the question “When did morality begin”? Our idea about ethics, our social life is the product of long period of time. And morality was not at first the outcome of a conscious thought process; its rudiments may find out in the origin of pre-human being. The process of moral developments started gradually. In view of this, the following few points may be stated.

**(a) Kin and reciprocity**

Among animals we find reciprocity. A monkey will present its back to another monkey to pick out parasites, after a time the roles will be reversed. In food sharing reciprocity is also a factor. Reciprocal behaviour has been observed in birds and animals, among wolves, wild dogs, dolphins, monkeys and apes. A question arises whether this behaviour is regarded as the basis of human ethics. There are good reasons to believe this possibility. At first the innate tendencies such as, mother’s love for children, duty of a man to
his family, a feeling of kinship etc. are present as instinct in men like animals. Kinship is the most basic and universal tie between human being. Secondly, reciprocity arises to fulfill man's basic needs. Here, one point is that though at the level of instinct the conduct of man can not be regarded as right or wrong, but the reciprocal situation demands faithfulness and obligation from man. Not only in primitive time but also in our time men have the capacity to find out reciprocators and non reciprocators and in this process develops the crude notions of fairness and cheating. Primitive people gave importance on reciprocity as good or right and cheating as bad or wrong.

Thus kinship and reciprocity explain a little about the root of human morality.

(b) Group morality

Moreover, the gradual development of group in primitive society needs more co-operations within one group or with another, because a single man or a single group can do very little for themselves. And their conduct becomes more rational. At this stage men consider that conduct to be right which are approved by the group. And probably there were well established ways of doing things which primitive men very naturally followed. Such uniform ways of acting are called customs.

(c) Customarily morality

Customs are passed from generation to generation by imitation and by percept. Primitive men wanted to fulfill their basic needs such as food,
drink, shelter and protection by acts, not by thoughts and theories. As most needs are common, there are considerable similarities in the behavior patterns of people living at the general level. Customs are the products of human needs under specific conditions. Some customs arise because of special incidents, historical accidents, or from geographical conditions. William Lillie, a modern moral philosopher, has nicely described customary morality in his book "An Introduction to Ethics." He stated that customary morality was able to give satisfaction to a great many individuals at a single time. Of course, they were not always able to show reason to clarify about such action. According to William Lillie, "Some time there was a fallacious piece of reasoning that a certain line of action had been harmful in one particular case and so must be harmful in every case." Whatever may be, early group life agrees that a person's right and responsibility are fixed by the group of which he is a part. The group is also in some sense a moral unit. For, the responsibility of a group was so rigid that when one member did a mistake, the whole group was thought to be responsible. The morality at this level is illustrated in the story of Achan in the Old Testament.

The system in which moral standards are based on customs and accepted without reflection is called customary morality. Customs once formed are passed on from parents to children by instruction, imitation, and tradition. Thus one characteristic of morality is that, it neglects the personal view or opinion in case of moral standards. But sometimes there may be defects in these standards. Standards determined by the primitive people.
were also influenced by superstitions instead of reasoning. One of the chief sources of primitive morality is tabu. Due to lack of reasoning tabu morality gives more importance on trivial matter instead of what we now regard as the most important affairs of morality. Bertrand Russell in his book “Human society in ethics and politics”, mentioned, “The tabu elements in conventional morality are less fierce in our day than they were 300 years ago; but they are still in part obstacles to human feeling and practice for example in the opposition to birth control and euthanasia”4. Thus at the level of customary morality moral life was guided by his group.

**Beginning of Modern Ethics**

As man began to be civilized they began to realize that morality is not a law imposed by his group or priests. Morality is a law which each and every individual can feel and understand. “Modern ethics began in those Greek thinkers who themselves passed from the level of custom to the level of conscience, particularly Socrates and the Sophists”5.

**The basic question**

Socrates tried to find out the answer of the question “how one should live?” And Plato thought that philosophy could answer the question. The need of ethics arises not only from man’s gregarious nature but it arises also from another difference between man and animal. Though in primitive age group morality arise due to smooth running of the life of primitive people, in later stage man’s inner conscience reflected upon many questions such as –
what is right? What is our duty? How can we be happy? Etc. Bernard Williams in his book "Ethics and the limits of philosophy" have mentioned that among all these questions the Socrates’ question “how should one live?” is the best place for moral philosophy to start. Here ‘One’ is referred to any one, not to a single person. The question leads us beyond the everyday sense of “what shall I do?” It is not immediate, or it is not about my present and future duty. But the question includes about the manner of our life. When we try to separate this Socrates question from other above mentioned questions, it seeks an explanation, why do we do this? And this explanation may lead us to what do we mean by ethical question. When we ask ‘What is our duty?’ we may use the term ‘duty’ in different respects of our lives. It may mean a service man's duty to his particular service or a business man's duty to his business etc. In both cases apart from being a service man or a business man he has a separate personality which remains unexplainable when we impose some duties as a service man or a business man. Secondly, when we ask ‘how may we be good?’ we may use the word ‘good’ in a particular sense or in a common sense. We feel a difference between two judgments like “he is a good man” and “he is a good cricketer”. In the first sentence the word good reflects the total personality of a man whereas the second sense reflects ‘good’ in a particular sense. As a social being though we are related to the second sense but the first sense is more important for us, because it affects our interest as a whole. And this is the moral sense. In a perfect society there is a coincidence between morality
and self interest. Geach in his article "Good and evil" makes a difference between the use of "good" before a functional word and a use of moral sense. A word is called functional when it refers to a particular object, for example Knife auger etc. Therefore, when we say 'a good knife', we have to know the meaning of good and the object. But when 'good' precedes words which are not functional, it is not sufficient to know the meaning of the word, we have also to know what standard is to be adopted for judging the goodness of this sort of thing. Such as when we say "good sunset", without determining the standard, the standard of a 'good sunset', we cannot comment generally sunset as "good". R.M. hare comments, "My own view is that the mere occurrence of a functional word after "good" is normally an indication that the context is not a moral one".

**Universality**

Thus, we see that to be a moral judgment the judgment should have a universal character. It does not depend upon our personal choice but it needs a universal standard. When one claims that he is living according to ethical standard, the justification must not depend upon his own choice. He can not point only to the benefits that it brings to him but he must give same weight to the interest of others. From ancient time philosophers and moralists have expressed the idea that ethical conduct is acceptable from a universal point of view. The second commandment of Jesus taught that we should do what is right not because it is rational or in our own self interest.
but of our love for man and for God. The stories held that ethics is derived from a universal natural law. Philosopher Kant develops this idea into his famous formula "Act only on that maxim which thou canst at the same time will to become universal law." R.M. Hare has developed Kant's theory in a logical form. In an article "universalizability\(^9\), in his book "Essay on the moral concepts", Hare tried to show that all moral uses of the word ought to involve a universal type maxim. For Hare, to say that a moral judgment must be universal means that if one judges a particular action as wrong, one must also judges any relevantly similar action to be wrong. Hare confirms that we may count a relevant difference in case of our judgment except uses of such words as I or my or singular terms such as proper names. Thus if a Nazi were to claim that he may kill a person because that person is Jewish, he must be prepared to prescribe that if somehow it should turn out he is himself of Jewish origin, he should also be killed.

In 18\(^{th}\) century David Hume argued that there exists in human nature a principle called humanity which operates independent of the principle of self-love. The Scottish economist Adam Smith accepted moral sentiment as "sympathy." Sympathy is not a specific feeling but occurs whenever we share any feeling with some one else. Utilitarian, in different forms, from Jeremy Bentham and Mill to J.J.C. Smart take pleasure and pain on an equal basis, "Each to count for one and none for more than one".
Thus in the development of ethical ideas different philosophers hold the universal nature of moral judgment. Though they are somehow different in establishing their notions but all agree that ethics is in some sense universal. The reality of this sense somehow lies in the practical outlook of our ancestors. Group morality needs the universal nature of ethics to sustain social life. In this sense morality indicates its social aspects. "Morality is sometimes defined as an instrument of society as a whole, as if an individual, family, or social class cannot have a morality or moral action-guide of its own that is different from that of its society."\textsuperscript{10} Thus we may first conclude that morality in a sense is general and it must be accepted by society as a whole.

**Ethical relativism**

In this sense we cannot judge one's judgment as ethical when it depends only upon his personal choice. But here one question arises that when a judgment has a social commitment may we judge it as an ever right judgment? Or is ethics relative to society only? Suppose, if one society approves dowry and other disapproves it, how can we justify about the wrongness or rightness of this? If we put forward our justification on social consideration, then it leads us to ethical relativism. Relative ethics maintains that there are no absolute moral rules but it admits some standards for all the members of a limited group. As a result of ethical relativism there are moral standards both in the past and in the present, and there are attempts to say that one is better than another on the prejudice of their own. The duel
which was regarded as right way of settling disputes in the seventeenth century is now considered wrong. The act of the 'Sati' or widow burning herself on her husband's funeral pyre, was regarded as a holy act by Hindus of a former age, but was regarded as bad by the British invaders of India. It is true that in a sense custom is relative to its society. Religious, economic and geographical conditions may determine some particular rules and regulations. But here we cannot use the term ethical in broad and actual sense. Peter singer, a modern moral thinker has discussed about Marxists morality in his book "Practical ethics". Marxists adopted that morality of a society is relative to its dominant economic class. So they refuted the claims of feudal and bourgeois morality to objective, universal validity. But if morality is relative, it is also applicable to communism. No doubt there are some reasons behind what Marxist tried to establish. And without a proper reason we cannot accept Marxism or capitalism.

Role of reason

Reason has an important role in our moral life. Only through emotion and passion we cannot arrive at an ethical judgment or ethical standard.

Socrates the great Greek philosopher once observed that an unexamined life was not worth living. It reflected the philosophical approach of Socrates to ethics. In his time the Sophists claimed that they knew about justice, temperance and law. According to Socrates without an experiment and rational explanation, one cannot solve all practical problems.
only through traditional and so-called wisdom. Traditional wisdom teaches
that justice consists in keeping promises and paying debts. However, in an
unusual situation such traditional rule of justice can not help us. For example
a person borrows a weapon from his friend and at the time of return he
comes to know that his friend has become insane. If his friend now wants his
weapon back, the person will be in dilemma. Under such situation traditional
rule of justice cannot give proper solution.

Our moral philosophers of the past sought to give us general
guidance concerning what to do, what to seek and how to treat others. It is
clear that they did not seek to give detailed practical advice as to how we
behave in a particular situation but they believed that they could
communicate some general but crucial knowledge of good and evil, and in
doing this reason played a great role. Socrates' pupil Plato had made a
distinction between philosophic virtue and customary virtue. Philosophic
virtue is founded upon reason and the grounds of customary virtues are
custom, habit, tradition, benevolent feelings, instinctive goodness etc. Plato
gave so much importance on reason that he compared customary virtue with
the virtue of bees and ants who act as if rationally but without any
understanding of it.

For Aristotle man's special function is reason. So the proper activity
of the reason is the "Summum bonum", the good for man.
The role of reason had occupied a special importance in German Philosopher Kant's philosophy. Kant insisted that freedom is to be found only in rational action, not in those actions which are the results of desires\(^5\). He stressed on universal morality based upon our rational thinking. For him rational action cannot be based on a single individual's personal desires. Kant called any action based on desires a hypothetical imperative and for him commands of morality must be categorical imperative and these must applicable to all rational beings. Without considering one's feelings and emotions one should do his own duty by guidance of reason and this is categorical imperative. For example, "be honest, so that people will think well of you", is not a categorical imperative, it is a hypothetical imperative because here the condition, helps you to be honest otherwise there is no need to be honest. So Kant said that commands of morality must be categorical imperative. Kant wanted to show how reason leads us to moral thinking in a concrete situation. One of his examples is as follows. Suppose that I plan to get some money by promising to pay it back, although I have no intention of keeping my promise. The maxim of such an action might be "make false promises when it suits you to do so." But if promises were so easily broken no one would rely on them and so this maxim could not be a universal maxim.

So it is clear that for an ethical thinking one should go through reason. To free from ethical relativism, to make ethics an universal one it must be based upon our rational thinking. In this way we may come to our second
stage that with a universal character ethical judgment or ethics must depend upon reason.

**Characteristic of rationality**

While discussing the role of reason, another question knocks us – what types of thinking carry rationality? Or how can we find out the rationality of a judgment?

The term “reason” has been interpreted in various ways, though commonly we use reason in contrast to faith. Reason does not depend upon one’s personal faith. It has a universal character. When we want to establish the validity of a judgment and we go through reason, then it must be applicable to all. Otherwise, we cannot say that it is based on reason. Scientific enquiry goes on that line. And in ethics also it is applicable. The following few points are taken into consideration while we discuss about different aspects of rationality.

**(a) Practical Value**

With a universal character, one important characteristic of reason is that it must have a practical value of our judgment if it is based on reason. Plato gave importance on reason but in practical field when he regarded women as inferior to men, can we say that Plato thought rationally? Plato’s view about marriage also follows from the same principal, so for him woman is not the complement of man.\(^16\) Slavery also was not denounced by Plato. Though Plato’s ethical ideas have a special contribution to ethics for all ages
but from our practical point of view we cannot accept slavery as Plato did. Perhaps such theoretical explanation compels one to think that ethics is not applicable to our practical life. Some people also regard that ethics is a system of simple rules like, "Do not lie", "Do not steal", "Do not kill" etc. It is also believed that ethics cannot help us in our complex situation of life. Perhaps the reason why today most people believe ethics as a useless subject is lying here. We have stated that the originality of ethics exists in early social group for their interaction, so it is not in our theoretical thinking only but it is lying in our practical social life. As ethics deals with rightness and wrongness of our voluntary actions, it is our duty to find out rationally the basic standard or criteria of rightness or wrongness.

(b) Relation of Ethics to human wellbeing

We know that the basic moral postulate is the worth of persons of men and woman. So the rightness or wrongness of an action should be related to the worth of men in general. At first rightness and wrongness of a judgment is based on human observation. In common experience of mankind something is reflected as good or bad. As for example, health is better than illness, love and good will are better than hate and ill etc. A social life not only leads on interaction for better living but there are natural tendencies of love, sympathy, friendship among human beings. Though tendency of indignation against injury comes from personal experience, it is human nature that develops indignation against other's injury also. Thus sympathy, love, resistance against injury are closely related to the standard of right and
wrong or good and bad and at the same time it leads us to the idea of liberty, justice, equality and human well-being. The idea of human well being is dependent on the idea of the unique and distinctive qualities of self hood.

Harold H. Titus and Morris Keeton in their book "Ethics for today" have included a provisional list of the unique characteristics of the person such as

(1) Self consciousness (2) Abstract thought or the power of reflective thinking (3) Ethical discrimination and some freedom of choice (4) Aesthetic appreciation (5) religious aspiration and commitment (6)Transcendence of particular condition of space and time (7) Development fulfilled through community living (8) Unique powers of creativity. These qualities of the person are needed to keep in mind when we talk about good life or the development of morality.

(c) Factual Value

The practical implication of human wellbeing also indicates that there must be a factual value of morality. In any process of reasoning, one must take account of the facts. As for example the average age at death of human beings is approximately seventy years is a fact. But when an American Nazi stated that "A Jew is not a man", it can not express a fact.

It is also true that the truth value of a factual statement may be changed due to changing evidence against the statement. As for example, it was thought that rapid scientific and technological development is the only instrument of human well-being. Al present, people realize the one -sided
development of science. This example also indicates that some factual statements may be wrong due to proper analysis of their evidence. But there are some universal factual statements which contain same value for all ages, such as slavery cannot be good, a normal individual seeks happiness, environment has always an influence on human being etc.

So, within a practical sphere of human society we may find out the proper ethical way. But it should be kept in mind that practical or empirical need does not indicate our bodily needs only. There are various factors that affect the total personality of a man. In first stage of civilization human needs were limited to some extent to their essential needs of survival. "But when civilization takes over something else supervenes in addition to what was a purely biological function in the first place." Herbert Feigl has given examples of such activities as through our eyes we recognize danger, we recognize our food by eye sight but seeing can become "beholding" the beautiful in nature and art. Similarly, hearing, a similar biological function in the first place, may become a means to listening to great music.

It is the social duty of a society to make ethical criteria considering a person's physical, intellectual and spiritual development. So, there is a great need of scientific outlook towards rightness and wrongness of an action. In this connection it is worthwhile to mention about the influence of religion on ethics.
(d) Religion and Morality

In general, most of the people think they cannot lead a moral life without the support of religion. Religion and ethics are inseparable in the thought of common people. But ethics and religion are two separate branches of philosophy, and each involves a set of beliefs, practices and attitude. Both are common in one point, that is, they are related to the way of life. Religious ethics believe that one should obey some rules and regulations as God's command or as a remedy of his sufferings whereas ethics seeks a rational ground of one's conduct. In present age, people try to come out from religious ethics due to its trans empirical nature. This nature is based upon our personal beliefs, but we cannot prove it rationally. So for a common ethical belief, there is no need to bring the idea of God or God's approval to do something better. On the other hand there is a need of moral awareness which can teach one that wrongness of an action can affect him also. But this does not also mean that there is no value of religious ethics. It only tries to indicate that ethics and religion both have their own special identities.

Ethics for modern time

In philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle to Rawls the fulfillment of the life of the person and social welfare has been stressed. Ethics in a proper sense should reconstruct these ideas with new knowledge and new ideas of our time.
Our traditional value system grew up in a simple agricultural society. Today we live in a complex interdependent mechanical civilization. This age is an age of advanced scientific knowledge. These advances have presented humanity great progress in different directions. As for example the progress of biomedical technology in treating and preventing diseases may be mentioned here. But at the same time it has presented new questions and uncertainties about the nature of life and death. Issues like euthanasia, abortion, surrogate mother, cloning have brought humanity into a serious moral dilemma.

Development in science and technology pose threat not only to human but to non-human and to plants also. The environment around us is now at stake. It is high time for us to find out the proper moral duty to protect our environment, where traditional and static morality cannot help us. Therefore, ethics should march on with the demand of changing situation. But this does not mean that we should ignore the basic traditional moral principle.

Conclusion

In our above discussion various aspects of ethics have been tried to reflect. Though the terms ethics and morality are used in a similar sense but there is a difference between ethics and moralizing and between a moral philosopher and moralizer. We cannot answer quickly about the origin of morality, perhaps the rudiment of morality was lying in a primitive society to
interact with each other. We notice this trend through group morality to customary morality. Customary morality was based on custom and people accepted it without reflection. It also neglected personal opinion in case of ethical standard. In some cases people were guided by superstitions instead of reasoning. In due course of civilization man began to realize that morality is not a law imposed by religion or his group but everybody must understand it. In modern time ethics has been included as a branch of philosophy. And when we try to find out what should be the nature of ethics some important points have been noticed. To be a moral judgment it should not depend upon one's personal choice, but it must have a universal character. Our ethical conduct must be acceptable from a universal point of view. Again this universal character must be supported by reason also. But the question arises how we can measure rationally i.e. the behaviour based on reason, in our ethical statement. Some basic criteria such as, practical and factual value, relation to human well-being etc. help us to judge the rationality of an ethical judgment. It may be stated that besides practical or empirical need, there are some other factors which affect the total personality of a man. Again, practical value may change with time. So one cannot assure that an ethical judgment remain useful for all the time. In view of this it can be concluded that ethics should march on with our changing situation.
Notes and References


2. Ibid (P-17)


5. William Lillie: An Introduction to Ethics. 1967 (P. 71)


9. Ibid.


14. Ibid. (P.315)


