

ETHICAL THEORY AND ORDINARY MORAL PRACTICE

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In our daily life, we face some typical questions which are determined by non-moral compulsive facts. Such questions are often related to our daily course of action, problems of health, in regard to child's admission in a school etc. Should I take this bus to go to Howrah? Should I buy health drink Horlicks for my child? Which doctor should I consult for my eye surgery? How to prepare my son for his admission in a school? These questions do not always involve any kind of moral consideration. Our decisions are influenced by factors like economic condition, experience, advice and various forms of checks and counter balances leading to a certain conclusion. Moral questions, on the other hand, expressed in such forms as what should or should not be done at a particular moment, in a certain situation of life in relation to other individuals with whom we are socially related. Thus different moral problems arise from our different situations of life. Many of our actions affect others either by being beneficial to them or by being harmful. We have feelings for others, we enjoy our friendship, sometimes we keep promises, and sometimes we break them. We are inclined to help people when they are in distress. Sometimes we regret for our doing wrong and sorry for breaking a promise. Again, on the other hand, sometimes we support caste discrimination, neglect the girl child and try to deprive those who are in great distress and support the wide gap between rich and poor and unfair distribution of the wealth of nations. All these are subject of moral considerations. How far can moral theories or principles address these moral issues that arise from the above moral consideration? Different theories have been put forward in the west in order to tackle these moral questions. According to deontological theories morality is based on universal, impartial rules or principles of rationality. In a deontological theory actions are held to be virtuous because they are intrinsically obligatory or admirable. Actions and characters may have a merit of their own not wholly derived from what they bring about. Teleological theory, on the other hand, is of consequentialist structure. It rests on the consequences that are produced by any particular act. The right act is that which will produce the most happiness, not just for the agent himself but for all who are in any way affected. Again in some other theories the prime point is to see how much justice is done for every section of

people. These theories do not pay any attention to the character of the individual. Virtue ethics is concerned with the virtuousness of an individual by reference to his motives, dispositions or will. Virtue ethics is not so much concerned with framing moral laws, rules or principles, its primary concern is the character of an agent. For Aristotle, a virtuous individual is a measure of virtuousness of an action.

Each moral theory used to entertain its criterion in the form of a deductive argument. The major premise would be the moral criterion which the theory entertains. The minor premise would be the description of the act whose moral worth is under consideration. And the conclusion would consist of the evaluation of the act in accordance with the moral criterion stated in the major premise. Moral philosophers believe that any moral problem can be settled by reducing it to a deductive model stated above. In this way the moral theories can guide us in ordinary or normal circumstances. But with changing times and changing complexities new problems arise and they cannot straight away be governed by a particular theory. Various instances of moral situations show that even if we are equipped with different moral theories, we can hardly be able to resolve the moral problems. Facing moral dilemma is intrinsic to our social livings. It creates a kind of interphase between individual and the collective. Now I am referring to some situations with which I have first hand association. The examples I have cited are mainly the moral dilemma arising from medical complication and some professional dilemma that a woman has to face. A young man Shibu seriously injured in a motor cycle accident and is lying in coma in an intensive care unit of a Nursing Home. The doctors find that Shibu will never regain consciousness but will linger indefinitely in a purely vegetative state. All his vital functions have been taken over by ventilator and other sophisticated machines. If any of these are removed, Shibu would die. Two of his relatives are discussing about what to do with the patient. One says that it would be utterly immoral to pull out the plug. The other disagrees. The reasons which he offers are that if the doctors pull out the plug, Shibu will die peacefully. He will feel no pain- after all he is completely unconscious. Life in this state is utterly without any meaning. Again the cost of keeping the artificial system is beyond the financial capacity of the parents. Here utility criterion leads to accept the withdrawal of life support machine. But, still miracles do happen or when I am saying miracles am I not predisposing myself towards a more utilitarian form of position?

Let us deal with another similar case where the application of moral theory would lead to some new problems rather than resolving the older ones. A woman gives birth to a child who has Down's syndrome. Here the dilemma is faced by the parents and doctors like whether to keep the baby in an incubator or not. If the doctors do not keep the baby in an incubator, the baby will die. If, on the other hand, they keep the baby in an incubator, it will survive. But in such a case the parents will have to face a heavy financial strain. They are not economically solvent. They will always be in a great distress. Keeping in mind all these utilitarian considerations the doctors decided not to keep the baby in an incubator. Now what will be the moral answer in this type of decisions? Kantian principle would acknowledge such actions as immoral. For Kant each and every human being is intrinsically valuable. The doctors ignored this fact and they have turned human life into a commodity. It will violate all principles of human right and dignities.

The common people would have a mixed feeling. Somebody will support the course of action adopted by the doctors; other will say that to do nothing for the survival of the baby, i.e. 'letting the baby die' is a sort of killing. So the doctors' decision is immoral. Can we really satisfy ourselves by taking any one of the alternatives? We cannot, for whichever alternative we take; there will be a sense of guilt.

We find other conflicting situations faced by working women of our society. A small family consists of four members - father, mother and two children. The parents are working in a Govt. office. Mother is always in a heavy pressure, she tries to look after her children properly and also she is very particular about her official work. Every time she is facing some moral questions - whether she will attend the office for an emergent meetings or she will stay at home preparing her child for the next day exam. Similar questions haunt her every time. Am I doing justice to my family by devoting so much time to my profession? Or is it better to leave the job? Again if she resigns from her job and stays at home she will be able to look after the children more attentively, but the family will face some economic strain. The children will be deprived of some better facilities. The woman is suffering from family obligations and also from professional obligations.

It is evident that every moral situation creates unique problems and it seems that it cannot be described by method of derivation from one or number of moral

theories. Some more serious moral questions we face in our present society. The questions are: Does abortion mean killing the fetus? Is the problem of euthanasia a problem against humanity? To what extent would surrogate motherhood be considered as a real motherhood? Abortion means killing the fetus. Killing cannot be supported morally. Someone may suggest that abortion is not immoral, because fetus is only a piece of flesh and is not a human being at all. Others will suggest that fetus is not a full grown human being, but it has that capacity. So abortion is immoral.

Euthanasia is also such a problem where even the doctor and family member of the patient are at a loss to take the decision. Should the family members allow the doctors to stop the treatment and as a result the patient will die or should they continue the fruitless treatment? Again if the patient expresses her desire to end her life, then also the doctors are in a dilemma - if they give importance to patients' autonomy, they will go against humanity and if they ignore patients' autonomy, the patient will suffer.

Another burning problem of the medical science is surrogate mother. In such a case a woman bears a child on behalf of another woman, either for her own egg or from the implantation in her womb of a fertilized egg from the another woman. Now the philosophical question which arises in the question of motherhood, who will be called a mother? - the woman who is carrying in her own womb the baby of other person or the lady whose fetus is actually growing in other's womb?

Moral philosophers attempted to make their theories as universally acceptable but it seems to me that this attempt has not been successful, neither is it generally acceptable. It is more or less evident that there is a gap between moral theories and ordinary moral practices. All events of our life do not always fit in moral theories. There is no difference between the sense of morality that a philosopher has and the sense of morality that an ordinary would have. It seems simply wrong to think that philosophers alone are able solve the moral problems. The objects of moral evaluation are objects of utmost moral concern. It is the characteristic of every human being that they are the moral agent. Moral problems are part of our daily life we try to negotiate them through our own justification that are governed by cultural, social as well as depending upon the circumstances in hand. In determining our rights and duties we are guided by our 'moral sense'. On observing a particular action at a glance we can first have a sense of approval or disapproval towards it. Then we

reflect on the peculiarities of the different circumstances in which the action is done and then we justify our attitude. This 'moral sense' that seems to determine the rightness or wrongness of an action is not a distinct faculty as it was supposed to be by the eighteenth century British moralists.¹ This 'moral sense' is a social habit which we acquire from our family background and from our social cultural, institutional, professional, economical and also by help of various comparative case-analysis. This 'moral sense' makes us aware of some moral values which we cultivate and experience through our various life situations and through interaction. Various moral ethos are basically mirroring of certain cultural belief. These values make us conscious about our rights and duties in a society. Damaging public property is bad, one should be kind to one's neighbour when the latter is in need of a help; cheating is always bad, we should not torture other unnecessarily. All these moral values make us conscious about our rights and duties in a society. Human welfare is considered as basically relevant to a moral decision. Generally all our moral questions for their solutions appeal to our moral sense. From these we should not suppose that all people will address the same moral situation in the same way. Due to the difference of social, cultural and family background no two persons can assess the moral situation in the same way. Even two persons brought up in the same socio-cultural and family background may have different attitudes towards the same moral situation; many times we are not able to draw an uncontroversial moral conclusion. This is our real life we are always confronted with moral dilemmas and these are varieties of answers (and not one single answer) and herein lies the multiplicity of our moral decision.

¹ The eighteenth century British moralists who accepted this notion of 'moral sense', but they believe that this moral sense is a separate faculty distinct from other faculties. The British moralists with their doctrine of 'moral sentiments' and Rousseau with his doctrine of 'the natural man' tried to establish the emotions in their 'rightful place' in human life and built practically their entire moral philosophies around this aim. Although the British moralists Hutcheson, Shaftesbury and Hume did not agree among themselves, but they did agree upon the idea of a substantive 'moral sense' as a separate and additional faculty in the same way in which 'sight' and 'hearing' are 'sense' or 'faculties'. They are more or less alike in that they take this 'moral sense' or 'sentiment' largely as a separate and distinct 'feeling' or 'emotion'.