

5. Freedom and Moral Rules

5.1 The subject matter of Ethics

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Preface

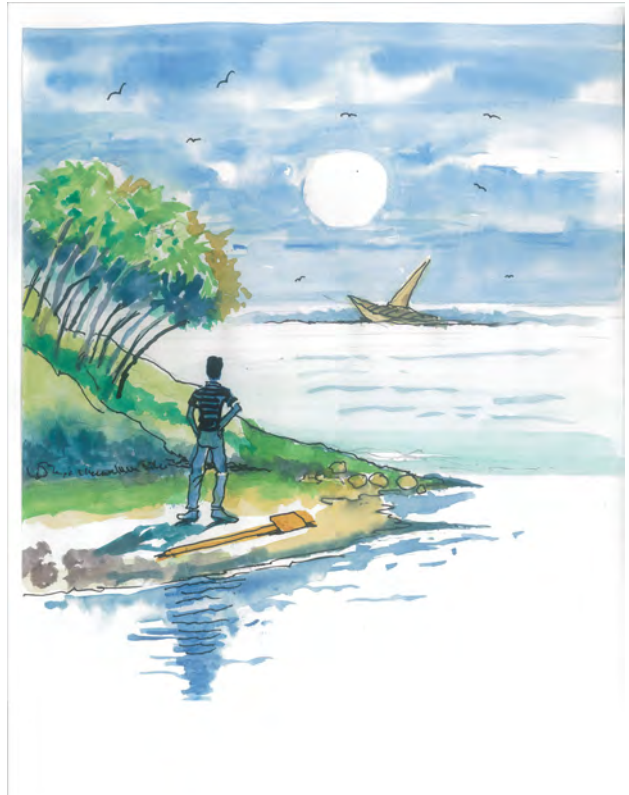
What irritates you the most? Let me guess – that everyone around keeps telling you what to do and what not to do, right? That people always nag you about the way you talk, the way you behave etc. “To hell with your rules and restrictions! I am not a child anymore! I can think for myself. Let me breathe! I want to be free to do just as I please...” - you feel like shouting from the rooftop, isn't it? But you never get such a freedom. Not only you, no one, no child, no grown-up gets the freedom to behave entirely as one would wish.

Everyone has to accept certain constraints in a societal setup. But does that mean that a person who doesn't want to be constrained, who wants to be free should not live in a society, does it? What if we settle down far far away, cut-off from all human contact? Will we be able to live in total liberty then? It's extremely tough to conduct this experiment for real. But as students of philosophy you are not required to conduct lab-experiments. Did you forget the little laboratory that's available to us 24x7? – Our brain, that is. And we can certainly conduct thought experiments. Imagine that a marine manages to save his life by

getting on a life-boat after a shipwreck.

Let's do!

Find out and discuss the story of Robinson Crusoe and Tarzan.



On an isolated island

The sea waves carry him to a secluded island. He is the only man on the entire piece of land. There's no one to reproach him, advise him, instruct him. He is free to choose for himself. He wishes to make life better by utilizing the living/non-living world around him. He gathers food, builds a safe shelter and lives a solitary, unrestrained life. Would you like to live this way? I don't think you would. How can we like a place, a world where we don't have near and dear ones, where there's no one to talk to, no one to share our joys and sorrows with?

Now let's add a few more things to this experiment.

Let's watch!

Watch a film based on survivalist themes such as *Cast Away*, *Jungle Book*, *Life of pi*.

Suppose if he (the marine) encounters another human being while wandering on the island. What would he feel? Joy, fear, anxiety, threat? – possibly everything. One thing is certain - thenceforth he'll have to be aware of another person's presence on the island. The life of the marine will be better if the other person co-operates with him. But for this he'll have to adjust, he'll have to regulate his ways or else there will be conflict. It will be detrimental for them both. They will have to share the resources of the island in order to avoid conflict, they will have to share responsibilities. And for all this to fall in place they will have to form a set of rules/laws. Do you see?

Let's do!

Roleplay – two persons on an isolated island

What we do, what we speak affects those around us, those who are directly or indirectly associated with us. Their behaviour similarly affects us. We know this and thus find ourselves tussling with questions: 'What to do?' 'How to do?' How to behave? A friend can't attend the classes sometimes and asks you to mark a proxy. Should you listen to her? You detest deafening music being played during festivals and social events. You know that it seriously harms the infirm,

the old people, infants and animals. What should you do about it? How does it matter if you pass time with a friend under the pretext of studying once in a while? Don't you face questions like these? How are we to find the answers? What is the basis to determine if the answers we find are right or wrong? Ethics guides us in all these matters. 'Ugh! that's what we are being told all the time,' you may react. 'Parents, teachers, relatives, elderly acquaintances – everyone constantly exhorts us. Even stories from storybooks have 'morals' attached to them.'

Let's talk!

Discuss the 'morals' given below a few moralistic stories.

'We are bored to teeth with it. Why add Ethics on the top of this?' Your doubts are surely fair-minded. But ethics does not preach. It doesn't burden us with lengthy list of do's and don'ts. It aids us to decide what to do and why. Ethics deliberates on factors that must be considered while determining right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, and the interrelationships between those factors.

5.1 The subject matter of Ethics

The subject matter of ethics is human behaviour and moral values. Psychology studies human behaviour too, but the two branches have different perspectives. Psychology describes human behaviour; it also traces its causes using empirical scientific methods. Ethics concerns itself with how human conduct should be. Facts are important to Psychology; values are important to Ethics. Ethics carries out a

moral evaluation of our acts and behaviour. It comprehensively discusses the principles, values that are to be used for this purpose. It puts forth ethical theories. This study goes on to illuminate our notions of good life on the individual and social level. We start marching toward the pertinent way of life. Man's actions shape his life for better or worse, after all.

Let's do!

Draw a concept map/mind map on functions of Ethics.

5.2 Types of action

What exactly is a human action? All that we do, all our 'karma' are our actions in a way. But Ethics does not study or assess all sorts of action. The actions which occur mechanically such as involuntary actions, or the actions without our conscious awareness do not fall under the realm of Ethics. It only takes into account actions which are performed consciously and willfully. Respiration, blood-circulation, metabolism 'happens' without our knowledge. We do not have to 'do' it. Eyes 'automatically' blink more when dust particles get inside them.

Let's write!

Make a list of different kinds of actions. Share it with your classmates. Classify these acts into voluntary and involuntary acts.

Let's understand this in detail. Things of the world are either living or non-living. The activities of non-living things are governed by nature. Things and forces affect each other mechanically.

We call them 'actions-reactions'.

Things have no control over this. A magnet attracts metallic objects due to its inherent characteristics. Whether it 'wishes' to do so is not a question at all. Similarly, it does not have the power to prevent it. There can be no other choice in this matter. Living beings however go beyond the chains of action-reaction and are able to 'act' intentionally. The potential to act/intervene is directly proportionate with the level of consciousness in any being.

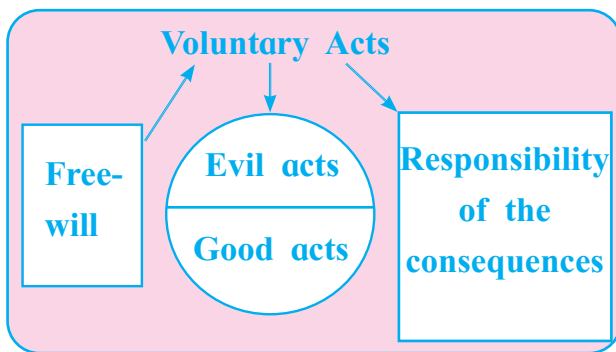
Let's talk!

Discuss instances of actions-reactions in groups.

The distinct constitution of humans and their developed level of consciousness allows them many options and they have the freedom to choose one of those. Non-human animal behaviour is largely governed by natural urges and instincts. Humans are free, at least to a certain extent, not to react to impulses and to regulate their natural urges. That is why even while being crucified Jesus Christ could say, "Forgive them father, for they know not what they do." Voluntary actions are rooted in human free will. Let's take an example -

There are many options, many ways to pass time. Some read, some go out, some listen to music, some watch a film. If we choose to watch a film, we have to choose a film next. Thus, voluntary action is to act by choosing one thing out of many. We perform a number of voluntary acts day in and day out. We also bear the responsibility for the consequences of the choice since it is our choice. The effects are also diverse. Some

actions lead to quick reactions and some actions have delayed effects. Some effects are anticipated by the doer, some are not. Many a times, we act with one intention and experience different effects. Since we have chosen acts, the responsibility to bear effect is also ours. Freedom and responsibility are thus always connected with one another. If humans did not have the liberty to act voluntarily they could not have concluded if their actions were right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral. Good counsel or ethical lessons would have meant nothing. Human free will renders the efforts to make the world a better place meaningful. There is a scope to dream of a better life, to hope to turn them into reality, to strive towards it.



Freewill enables man to perform ‘good’ acts as well as ‘evil’ acts. Human behaviour can be right or wrong. Rules have been set down since the beginning of civilization so that human conduct be right and good. Rules channelize human disposition. Rules enter our lives very early on. Our domestic setting, our neighbourhood, our school, the playground, the public places – every space is armed with rules that direct our behaviour. Traditional customs, rights and rituals are various forms of rules. Religion and law try to impose limits on individual freedom in order to monitor his conduct. We don’t understand much of this in childhood, but

the rules begin to suffocate us as we grow up.

The urge to lead an unrestrained life is quite overwhelming specially in an age such as yours. That’s why you frequently wonder why we need these rules. Can’t society be constraint free? Let’s consider these questions, shall we?

‘Man is a rational animal’. You might also have heard that he is a social animal. He naturally prefers to live in collectives. In ancient times he realized that human beings must unite and co-operate in order to keep up in the struggle for survival. This basic need gave rise to society. Several kinds of human potential can only flourish in a societal setting. All our needs right from survival to our real development as human beings, can be fulfilled in a society. Society is essential for human wellbeing. The existence and wellbeing of a society depends on individuals, just as an individual needs society for his existence and wellbeing. Individuals and society have a relationship of interdependence.

A society consists of people with diverse dispositions and abilities – it is a mixed bunch of flowers we may say. Everyone is nurtured differently. Everyone has different opinions, thoughts, goals, values. Naturally, there’s a possibility of conflict of interest. A society constituted of self-centred individuals where everyone thinks solely of his/her own goals and interests shall soon be in peril. There will soon be chaos. The powerful, brush aside the interests of the powerless, they exploit the powerless in case of the absence of a social mechanism that synchronizes conflicting interests and aspirations.

Virtue-based Ethics

The western tradition of Ethics has three major theories - Utilitarianism, Deontology and Virtue-based Ethics. The first two edify us on how to judge an act to be moral or immoral. We shall study them next year. Let's briefly get introduced with the third, namely Virtue-based Ethics. The person, and not the act, is the focus of this theory. Persons with estimable character mostly display moral behavior. So, this theory stresses on shaping the moral character of man rather than separately regarding the morality of the acts. Prominent ancient Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle advocated virtue-based Ethics. The concept of 'virtue' had an important place in medieval Ethics. However, it went out of fashion in the modern times and the other two theories were presented. In the Greek

tradition 'virtue' means an excellent trait of character.

Aristotle differentiated between intellectual virtue and moral virtue. Ethics evidently concerns itself with moral virtue. Moral virtue is the disposition to perform morally right acts under any circumstances. Persons who have a virtuous nature almost habitually behave well. Honesty is a virtue. A person who is honest by nature normally won't face the dilemma as to whether to behave honestly. The person simply behaves honestly because that is an inescapable part of his / her character.

There are many moral virtues. Greek tradition considers Courage, Temperance, Wisdom and Justice to be the cardinal virtues.

Let's collect!

Collect newspaper reports on 'powerful exploiting the powerless' and create a portfolio for the class.

'Might makes right', don't they say? Such a state of affairs benefits no one neither the individual nor the society in the long run. Therefore, we need rules to regulate the inherent self-serving urge. Self-love is natural, but in the course of time; qualities like pity, kindness and sense of affection for others have also naturally evolved in man. Besides, through reason, man intelligently understands that being considerate towards other peoples' interests is advantageous to his own.

Reckoning with the co-dependency between individual and society; self-interest and societal-interest cannot be regarded in an isolated manner. Moral code maintains the balance between the two. The criteria that are used to interpret 'right' and 'wrong' are ethical criteria.

5.3 The necessity of moral laws

Let's observe an example from our daily life. A great disorder ensues on busy roads soon as traffic signals stop working in the evening. Everyone tries to thrust through the traffic. No one wants to be patient. No one is heedful of the inconvenience faced by children, elderly people or handicapped persons.

Let's watch!

Find a video that depicts a collapsing system / mechanism. Show it in class and discuss afterwards.

For example, the film “Happy Anniversary”

This situation is not only chaotic but hazardous. It increases the risk of road accidents. This example illustrates that after the breakdown of societal rules and the mechanism designed for their implementation; only self-regulation can save a system. Absence of rules leads to disorder. (I think, by now you might have understood why we need rules and why we must follow them, am I right?)

Let's discuss-

- (1) What will happen if everyone always lied?
- (2) Why should we observe moral rules?

Society originates in rules/laws and both evolve in due course of time. These rules change as per the wants and demands of time. Sometimes new rules replace the old. The process of change isn't always harmonious though. Historical moments of change witness a great friction between the old and the new orders. One has to choose from the two. Rules direct our judgements on rightness or wrongness of actions. But sometimes even rules have to be examined for their validity. For this we have to turn to values.

‘Value’ means merit, worth or

importance of something! We normally use this word to connote ‘monitory worth / price’ of something. But ‘value’ as in price signifies only the monitory value of a thing. Value in Ethics has much broader significance. An aid received in times of hardship is very valuable. Admitting a seriously injured person into a hospital is an act of invaluable charity. Trying to save a person's life is an in-valuable act since life is supremely valuable, the most precious. Things obtain a value in the very context of life.

5.4 The concept of value and types of values

There are several kinds of values. Things that fulfill our basic needs, natural urges, desires, instincts, feelings have value in some sense or the other as they are indispensable to human life. Likewise, some things are valuable for the wellbeing, security and progress of a society. An exhaustive study of values takes an overview of a wide variety of values such as personal, economical, social, political, cultural, religious, spiritual, ethical, aesthetical etc.

Ethics primarily deals with ethical values. Values are mainly linked with a person's disposition/attitude, intent, aspirations and acts. We do not ascribe ethical value to things or their properties. They have an ‘amoral’ value. If we want to buy a cell phone, we must pick one from a plentitude of available models. We make this choice on the basis of amoral value of the cell-phone. Its price is its monitory value. Its storage memory, its numerous facilities, its weight and user-friendliness determine its utility value. Its shape, built, color and attractiveness

determine the aesthetic value. We make a choice using such criteria. But our choice will have a moral value if we think further and decide to buy cell phone from a company which doesn't engage child labour, which sticks to an eco-friendly policy and so on.

Let's write!

Write examples of amoral and immoral acts. List the criteria that confirm something to be amoral or immoral.

Here the value will be ascribed not to the product but to a company that adheres to an important, good policy, and to your choice (to buy from that company). This shows that values can be moral or amoral. Moral values are connected with the person, his acts and facets of his personality as we saw. But this isn't a sufficient differentiating criterion. When I call someone an outstanding sportsman or a talented artist, I evaluate them by amoral values. But when I call a person honest or compassionate, I evaluate them in the context of moral values. Moral values and amoral values employ different criteria for calling something a 'value'. Convenience, usefulness, beauty determine amoral value of various kinds of objects, people or actions.

However one needs to consider a person's intentions and effects of his/her actions on other people and society at large for determining his moral value and that of his actions. The acts that do not hamper other peoples' interests, acts that benefit individuals, collective or a society are generally considered moral. 'Amoral' and 'immoral' both have 'moral' in them,

with a negative prefix attached. But they aren't synonymous. That which lies beyond the scope of morality, that which cannot be viewed from ethical lense is called 'amoral', for instance a cell-phone. 'Immoral' is antonymous to 'moral'. That which violates / goes against morality is called 'immoral'. But it is still a moral evaluation of a conduct. The word 'immoral' lies within the scope of moralistic gaze.

Let's do!

Create a concept map on 'values'. Work in groups. Exhibit all the maps in class.

Classification of non-moral values

In our daily life, we frequently evaluate things and persons. Most of the times, such an evaluation is in the form of our judgement about the non-moral values that the things or persons have. It does not always consist of an explicit mention of values. Many a times the words good/bad are used instead. The values indicated by them, change as per the object, person and the situation. In calling a knife 'good' what is indicated is that the knife is sharp. But a butter knife is good if it is blunt. The meaning of the sentence stating that a certain eatable is good can be that it has not deteriorated, or that it is tasty or that it is nutritious. In short, the non-moral value of things/persons is determined by their characteristics and within the context of a situation. That is why if we decide to make a list of these values, it can never be perfect/exhaustive.

However it is possible to divide them into two types. These two types are values in themselves and instrumental values or intrinsic values and extrinsic values. The value of some things lies in their being means or instruments for attaining some other, external value. For instance though the value of a knife is determined on the basis of its sharpness, the sharpness is valued because with it, the function of the knife, i.e. to cut something; is performed efficiently. The bitter medicine to be consumed during illness has value because basically health has a value. When we are not unwell, that medicine does not have value at that time. Do you think that health has a value as a means to something else? We wish to attain many things in life, but we want them as we think that we will be happy if we get them. That is why, value of happiness is for its own sake. It is not valued for something else or as a means for something else. That is why the value of happiness is value-in-itself or an intrinsic value.

We do not use the words ‘moral’, ‘immoral’ in day-to-day conversation to refer to either persons or acts. We use the words ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in daily life to evaluate persons and actions. Ethics uses these words too. These words have both moral and amoral connotations. Hence, we must meticulously perceive sense in which the words are used in our conversations or writing. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ are used as adjectives that describe objects, their properties, their correlation, persons, the aspects of their

personality etc. Moral value can be ascribed only to people and people-related things as we just saw. We most probably use ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in moral sense when we attach it to people. But the words can’t be said to convey a moral meaning if the assessment of a person or an act is associated with its amoral value. A ‘good’ mobile, a ‘good’ sportsman, a ‘good’ artist are a few examples of the amoral usage of the word ‘good’, as opposed to which in ‘a good man’, ‘good’ has a moral sense.

Let’s do!

8-10 students will stand in a circle. A student, with a ball in hand, will narrate an example of an act and throw the ball to another. That student will identify the type of the act – moral, immoral or amoral. And pass the ball to someone else. (This game will help students to gain clarity on the types of actions).

The words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ similarly have two connotations. Mugging up a lesson is the ‘wrong’ way to study, grasping the subject is the ‘right’ way. Microscope is the ‘right’ instrument to observe things that are not visible to the naked eye. Radio is a ‘right’ medium for the wider dissemination of news. – All these instances use the word ‘right’ in an amoral sense. On the contrary, when we tell a lie and our teacher says, ‘it’s not right what you did’; or ‘you did the right thing by helping your elderly neighbor to go to the bank’ – these sentences use the word ‘right’ in a moral sense.

The amoral usage of ‘right’ often considers the work-efficiency of an object,

instrument or a mode/method.

Sometimes compliance with general rules is called 'right' behavior and violation of the rules is called 'wrong' behavior. It is a matter of a widespread rule of hygiene to wash one's hands and feet after getting home. The conduct that obeys this rule is 'right' conduct. We expect these words to be used in a moral sense when the behavior is judged to be right or wrong with the help of a moral code. The examples that illustrate the moral connotation of these words are related to rules such as 'one must not lie', 'one must help the needy', 'Duty' is one more frequently-used word in life and Ethics. Duties can be familial, social, political. When we call something 'duty' we mean to say that it must be done. A duty must be done irrespective of our willingness. It is perhaps for that reason that you don't like being reminded of your duties. Your annoyance is often associated, not so much with the action, as with the obligation to perform it. Parents, when going out, ask you to look after your younger sibling. They say it is your duty and you frown in disapproval. You love your sibling and are perfectly willing to rush to his / her aid, but you do not like being compelled to do so. To fulfill a duty is to carry out a responsibility properly.

The society can run smoothly only if all the members shoulder their own responsibility. Responsibility does entail some restrictions. Suppose you take the responsibility to perform an event in the college gathering. You will be bound to devote it enough time, prepare well, won't you? The performance will come out brilliantly only if you accept these obligations. The individual and the society can advance towards their goals only by accepting restraints, duties and responsibilities.

Till now we tried to understand moralistic uses of the words 'good', 'right' and 'duty'. Deliberation over the criteria to judge 'goodness' or 'righteousness' is the further level of study of ethics. What has an ethical value? What actions ascertain a person's ethical duties? According to what laws? Philosophers have many theories, principles, concepts in answer to these questions. Ethics critically examines these. This is an ongoing task. Although some fundamental moral values can be applied across time, we have to reconsider their application owing to challenges that the changing circumstances bring. Sometimes we have to make amendments. Sometimes we must incorporate new values. Moral deliberation is thus a perpetual process.

EXERCISE

Q.1 Fill in the blanks choosing the correct option from the bracket.

- (a) Man can perform good actions because he has
(freedom of expression, free will, freedom of speech)

- (b) Ethics studies behavior and its
(aesthetic value, moral value, utility value)
- (c) Actions-reactions take place according to in the non-living world.

(social laws, moral laws, laws of nature)

Q.2 Take the odd word/pair out.

- (a) Good-bad, right-wrong, legal-illegal, just-unjust
- (b) beauty, good, virtue, duty

Q.3 Distinguish between.

- (a) Moral and amoral values.
- (b) Voluntary and involuntary actions.

Q.4 Write short notes on.

- (a) Virtue
- (b) Duty
- (c) Types of action

Q.5 Write the answers in 20-25 words.

- (a) What is a voluntary act?
- (b) What is moral philosophy?
- (c) What is free will?
- (d) What is the importance of laws in human life?

Q.6 Explain the following statements with examples.

- (a) The subject matter of ethics and psychology is human behaviour but their perspectives are different.
- (b) Absence of rules leads to disorder.

Q.7 Write a Dialogue.

- (a) Suppose that while going for an examination, you see an accident. You have to decide what should be done at that time.
- (b) Since 75% attendance is necessary, Rajesh marked his friend's attendance even though he was absent.

Activity

Discuss with your family members the reasons for which your family wants you to follow a rule which you find very restrictive.

