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ETHICS - I

(UPSC MAINS)



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ETHICS-I

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CONTENTS

1. Ethics & Human Interface	1-28
2. Human Values	29-64
3. Attitude	65-85
4. Emotional Intelligence	86-90
5. Moral Thinkers & Philosophers/Philosophies	91-178
Previous Years' UPSC Questions (Solved)	179-199
Practice Questions	200

Ethics & Human Interface

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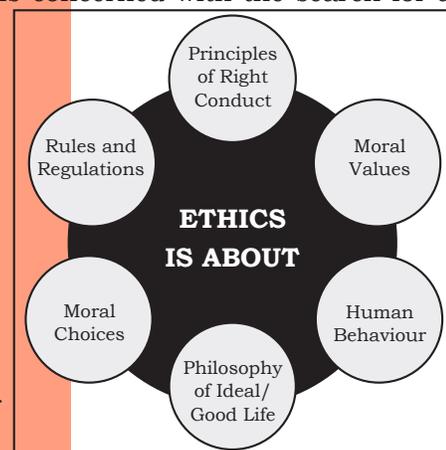
Chapter

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that involves systematic study of human actions from the point of view of its rightfulness or wrongfulness. The term 'ethics' is derived from the ancient Greek word 'ethos', which means 'custom', 'human character' or 'disposition'. Ethics is also called moral philosophy because of it is concerned with the search for a definition of right conduct and good life.

To put simply, ethics is the branch of knowledge that studies human behaviour & actions and tries to determine the moral principles that govern that behaviour. As a branch of philosophy, ethics tries to investigate questions like:

- What actions are right or wrong in particular circumstances? Or How people ought to act?
- What are our rights and responsibilities?
- What is the best way for people to live? Or How to live a good life?

In practice, ethics seeks to resolve questions of human morality, by defining concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime. It is a set of moral principles by which people conduct themselves personally, socially or professionally.



Essence of Ethics

At the heart of ethics is a concern about something or someone other than ourselves, our own desires and self-interest. Ethics is concerned with other people's interests, with the interests of society, with the 'ultimate good'. Thus, when people think ethically they are giving some thought to something beyond themselves. The essence of ethics can be understood as follows:

- The scope of ethics includes only voluntary human actions. This means the actions done by human consciously, deliberately and in view of an end. It is concerned about that part of human conduct for which human has some personal responsibility.
- It is a set of standards that a society places on itself and which helps in guiding behaviour, choices and actions of its members.
- It is concerned about what is right, fair, just or good; about what we ought to do, not just about what is most acceptable or expedient.
- It endeavours to analyse and evaluate the principles embodied in various alternatives for conduct and social order.
- It includes study of universal values such as essential equalities of all men and women, human or natural rights, obedience to the law, concern for health and safety and, increasingly, also for the natural environment.

- In order to understand ‘what ethics is’, it is important to know ‘what ethics is not’?
 - **Ethics is not morality:** Ethics differs from morals and morality in that ethics denotes the theory of right action and the greater good, while morals indicate their practice. Ethics is not limited to specific acts and defined moral codes, but encompasses the whole of moral ideals and behaviour, a person's philosophy of life. Moreover, morality does not demand acquiescence from others the way ethics does. A person can remain moral all by himself without accounting for morality of others, whereas ethics includes all.
 - **Ethics is not religion:** While religion is individualistic in nature, ethics applies to everyone irrespective of the religion one follows and even those who do not follow any religion (atheist).
 - **Ethics is not law:** In law, a person is guilty when he violates the law or the rights of others, however, in ethics one is guilty even if one thinks of doing so.
 - **Ethics is not intuitive or feeling based:** Ethics is not based on whether we feel something is right or wrong. Sometimes, our intuition signal us that we are facing an ethical dilemma, and we want to do the right thing, but feelings or intuition also may prevent us from behaving ethically, perhaps out of fear or conflicting desires.

Thus, at its simplest, ethics is a system of moral principles that determines how people make decisions and lead their lives.

Importance of Ethics

- **Prescribe standards of right and wrong:** As a discipline, ethics identifies what is good or evil, just or unjust, fair or unfair practice, or what is our moral duty. It prescribes, well established standards that a person should follow, concerning rights, obligations, fairness, and benefits to society and so on. These standards put a reasonable obligation to stop unethical activities or crime such as stealing, assault, rape, murder, fraud and so on.
- **Improves thinking, perspective and judgements:** Ethics provides us with a moral map, a framework that we can use to find our way through difficult issues. It helps a person to critically evaluate his/her actions, choices and decisions. It assists a person in knowing what he/she really is and what is best for him/her. Thus, helping a person to decide what he/she should do for the attainment of the best.
- **Determines our action or inaction:** In absence of ethics, human actions would be rendered random and aimless. The ethical standards help us to organize our goals and actions to accomplish a good and virtuous life and also larger good for society.
- **Ethics is the basis of healthy and peaceful society:** Every institution designed for human good has some rules and regulation based on moral principles. Being ethical helps a person to admire and follow rules. Ethics/morality provides a common point of view. The common point of view among people leads to agreement among them. This way ethics provides for stability in society and other institutions.
- **Ethics helps make society better:** It teaches to treat everyone equally and respect each other's rights; without ethical conduct, society would be a miserable place.
- **Solving moral dilemma:** Many moral issues like abortion and euthanasia create ethical dilemmas. Ethics offer us rules and principles that enable us to take a clearer view of moral problems.
- **Aids in exercising discretion:** It provides a set of principles and helps to make clear choices in particular cases where neither social norms nor law can provide the answer or solution. It allows us to work on skills such as exercising discretion, so when we are faced with real situations that impact others, we are capable of taking a morally sound decision.



- **Guide to both private and public life:** Ethics is integral to both private and public life. In personal sphere ethics guide our relations with our fellow beings and in professional life or public administration, ethics focuses on how one should act and reflect in order to act responsibly. For instance, in business, adherence to ethical principles leads to the rejection of the route that would lead to the short-term profit over larger corporate social responsibility. Meanwhile, in political and social life, ethics decides how human life and institution must be organized to be moral.
- **Understanding of ethics is a way to self realization:** Every individual inherently desires to be good. Being ethical or moral helps person to attain what is best for him. It deepens the reflection of the ultimate question of life and its purpose. Thus, ethics is fundamental to a satisfactory human life.

Thus, ultimately, ethics is important, not so that we can understand philosophically, but rather so we can improve how we live. By being moral, we enrich our lives and the lives of those around us.

Determinants and Consequences of Ethics in Human Action

'Human action' is the starting point of ethics. One of the very first points of consideration in judging the morality or immorality of any act of a person is that it must be a conscious human act, before it can have any moral quality whatsoever. Thus, since digestion, growth, movement of blood in the veins, etc. are not under the control of our will, are not spoken of as moral acts at all. They are acts of a human person, but they are not called 'human acts'.

A human act is one that proceeds from knowledge and free will. If either adequate knowledge or freedom is lacking in the act of a person, then that act is not fully human and therefore, not fully moral. Thus, the judgment of rightness and wrongness can be passed on only those actions which are voluntary. They have to be intended by the doer, based on adequate knowledge, i.e., the act must be voluntary.

However, there are certain factors that diminish or reduce the voluntariness of human actions. These are called the impediments to conscious human action.

Impediments to Human Actions

- **Ignorance:** Ignorance is the absence of knowledge, the state of being unaware. If an act is done through ignorance, it goes out of the realm of judgment of ethics. For instance, a foreigner who is unaware of the societal laws and norms, if violated the norms through such ignorance, the action is not a human action.

However, there are cases of willful ignorance when individuals deliberately ignore or disregard important information or facts. It cannot be an excuse for violation of ethics/morality. For instance, a public administrator cannot claim that she lacks knowledge of management principles or ethics in public organizations.

- **Passion:** Passions are powerful emotions of anger, grief, love, hatred or greed. Some passions precede an act of the will and cause the will to act. As per moral thinkers, it is human will and reason that holds human passions under check. However, when overpowered by emotions, such as a sudden rage or a fit of anger, it destroys the use of reason, an individual loses control over his will, thus also destroy the voluntariness of the action.

However, sometimes, the actor deliberately arouses his passions; it is a direct action and any subsequent action is voluntary in a cause or an effect of causing the passion to emerge. A dictator who deliberately causes himself to become enraged, and as a result orders killing of all those who defy his orders is guilty of homicide to the extent that he foresaw the killing.

- **Violence:** Violence is the external physical force exerted on a person. When a person offers all the resistance he can, actions done in these circumstances are involuntary and therefore, not human actions. For instance, a man may be driven into involuntary acts under the threat of violence against himself or his loved ones. In a case of bank robbery if the robber holds the gun to the cashier's head and the cashier parts with money, evidently the cashier's act is involuntary. He incurs no guilt for the act, though he did hand over the cash physically.

However, if he does not offer as much resistance as possible, the actions performed may be less free and therefore, human in proportion to the resistance not exerted.

There are also some other impediments to human actions like habit, temperament, and psychological states (such as mental illness, psychoneurosis, psychosis, schizophrenia, etc.), substance abuse (actions under the intoxication of drugs or alcohol) that may sometimes interfere with voluntariness, in that they blur knowledge and weaken the will. However, though they lessen the voluntariness of actions, but never destroy it.

Determinants of Ethics in Human Action

The actions performed by human beings cannot be genuinely called as human actions, if any, of the aforesaid conditions, i.e., ignorance, passion or violence, are present; the action is not human and hence, cannot be subjected to scrutiny in ethics. However, when there is reason or knowledge involved, when the acts are voluntary, it can be determined whether a given human act is good or bad.

As per moral theologians there are certain determinants of the moral quality of our actions. These are:

- **Nature/Object of the Act**

One of the criteria of judging the morality/goodness of human acts is its object/nature. Every action has a particular nature/essence that makes it different from other actions. An act thus specified may, when considered in itself, be good, bad, or indifferent. Thus, helping a blind person across the street is a good act in itself; to blaspheme is bad in itself, and learning to shoot is in itself an indifferent act.

However, there are certain types of acts that are called intrinsically evil/immoral by its very nature, that is, by its inherent moral meaning. An intrinsically evil act is an act that is always bad, always sinful. It is never good, never appropriate, and never useful irrespective of the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances.

Reason also attests that some of the human acts by their very nature are incapable of being good because they radically contradict the notion of good, for instance, rape, murder of innocent children, or blasphemy.

Meanwhile, there are some specific acts such as abortion, embryonic stem cell research, same sex marriage, euthanasia, etc. that are considered intrinsically immoral as per moral codes of certain societies/religion. Even though, intentions may sometimes be good, and circumstances frequently difficult, these acts are considered non-negotiable and hence punishable by such societies. However, such instances of judging morally of an act as evil or sinful prior to a consideration of the circumstances and intentions might be questionable, debatable or even invalid in some other societies.



■ Intention/Purpose of the Action

Actions may be either good or bad, depending on why we do them. According to Aristotle and teleological theorists every human action, no matter how trivial, has some purpose/motive/intention behind it. A person has the moral responsibility for all such actions (deliberate or omissions, doing or withholding from an action, trying or attempting to bring about a certain result) that involves agent's foresight, cause, desire, or motivation. Therefore, the intention of the person in action is an element essential to the moral evaluation of an action. The manner in which purpose/intention affects the ethics of an action is outlined below:

- **For a human act to be morally good the agent or doer must have a good intention.** He must want to accomplish something that is good in one way or another. For instance, a civil servant should have the motto of serving his country and citizen to join the public administration, and not just the intention to get a secure job of power and prestige.
- **The motive an agent has can change an act morally good by nature into a morally evil act.** Telling the truth is a morally good action by the object, but to tell the truth about someone with the intention of injuring him turns an action still good by object into a bad one. Whistle blowing about malpractices/corruption in an administrative department, not in the spirit of good governance, but to seek vengeance from a senior or to malign the government, turns the morally good act into immoral one.
- **A good intention, no matter how good, does not make something essentially immoral into something morally good.** The end does not justify the means. For instance, a mother who murders her young daughter after she comes to believe that the world is a place of suffering, and happiness is impossible. She kills her daughter in order to save her from the torment of living. This does not absolve her from guilt of committing an essentially immoral act of killing someone. Similarly, bombing and killings by nationalists against despotic government, is still murder. One cannot use murder, morally evil by nature, as a means to any end.
- **An action that has a good object can become more or less good because of its purpose.** For instance, giving money for a charitable cause is a good action in itself; giving a large amount that one can afford increases the goodness of the action. However, if a millionaire donates to a charitable trust to conceal his black money it decreases the goodness of the act even though, incidentally, the poor are helped.
- **An action which is inherently wrong may become a greater or lesser wrong depending on the purpose of the moral agent.** For instance, killing a human is moral evil. However, killing a criminal who is a potential threat to many lives, is less immoral. However, if an officer kills the same criminal in an encounter to get a promotion, it becomes a greater evil.
- Many such activities are said to be indifferent morally in themselves, but they receive their moral quality from the intention behind them. For example, taking an alcoholic drink is not sinful; drinking in order to get drunk is. Similarly, learning fighting skills (like Karate) is a neutral act, but if the intention is to threaten others from our strength or take vengeance from someone, it becomes an immoral act.

■ Circumstances of the Action

No action, however, is performed in the abstract. Every human act in the concrete order is done under particular circumstances. Circumstances may therefore affect the morality of an action and add something to the moral quality. Circumstances of a human action include such things as the act being done at a particular time, in a particular place, by a particular agent, in a particular manner. How the differing circumstances change the rightness or wrongness of actions can be understood as outlined below:

- **Sometimes circumstances affect the morality of the action only in degree**, that is, they contribute to increasing or diminishing the moral goodness or evil of human acts. For example, stealing is bad by object; stealing a rare object/or stealing from a destitute/poor increases the malice of the action. On the other hand, if a robber acts like Robin Hood by stealing from the rich to help the poor, his robberies become less immoral.
- **Some circumstances impart a new type of goodness or badness to an action** by the effect of when and where it takes place.
 - ◆ **When:** Whether it is done during war or peace. For instance, there is an increase in the guilt of an intelligence officer who, when caught by an enemy country at the time of war, succumbs to threat of violence and discloses highly confidential information that severely affects national secret.
 - ◆ **Where:** Similarly, where the action takes place can affect its morality. For instance, a murder in a church/cathedral adds an additional moral evil to murder itself as it involves the profanation of a consecrated place of worship and hence the additional evil of sacrilege.
- **Circumstances can also diminish or lessen the agent's responsibility.** For instance, a woman who kills the person who attacks her chastity is absolved from the guilt of killing someone.

Thus, since all human actions occur at a certain time and at a certain place, the circumstances must always be considered in evaluating the moral quality of any human act.

Meanwhile, it must be understood that 'a morally good act requires the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together'. If any one of the three is evil, then the human act in question is evil and should be avoided.

Agents that influence/ determine the ethicality of human action:

- Individual personality traits
- Culture or country of the individual
- Organization/ industry

Consequences of Ethics in Human Action

The consequences are the effects caused by an action. Many of our actions, decisions, and choices of everyday life are made with an eye to the consequences. Human beings by nature tend to be consequences oriented. That means we have a tendency to seek intended results and the quality of these results/consequences depend on how much goodness they contain.

An action is judged to be good or bad on the basis of its outcome. If other people suffer, it is wrong. If people benefit, it is right. Consequences, then, are an important consideration in our analysis of ethical conduct.

The cases where the consequences of an action are attributable to the doer who is held responsible for an effect, involves the following conditions:

- **If the doer holds notice (even if vaguely) or know ahead what the consequences of a particular choice or action will be**, he/she is presumed to have willed the effect. For example, in case of a bad effect, if a hunter sees an object, but is unsure whether it is a man or a deer. The hunter anticipates vaguely to what the consequences of firing a shot may be; killing of deer or killing of men. If the hunter chooses to shoot anyhow, he has willed the effect, whether the killing of deer or killing of men.



- **If the actor does not perform the act, but causes another one to do it (in the form of help, encouragement or persuasion), the first person is still morally responsible** for the consequences of the act to the degree that he or she foresaw those consequences. For instance, if a politician gives a hate speech that incites communal violence in a sensitive area, he will be considered guilty of the commission of a wrong act.
- **If one remains silent or does not take any action:** If a person witnesses a road accident and refrains from helping the victim in critical condition, he fails to perform the duty of a good Samaritan therefore, is guilty of errors of omission and the bad consequences (death of the victim) that follow.

Thus, whatever increases, lessens or destroys the liberty and knowledge that are essential for a moral act also increases, lessens or destroys the responsibility of the actor.

Doctrine of Double Effect

Some actions have two effects/consequences—good and bad. How does someone decide the morality of such actions? Ethicists provide a few general principles to help decide the morality of acts of double effect. They are:

- The action that produces the two effects must be either good or indifferent— that is, not intrinsically wrong.
- The good effect must be immediate—that is, not obtained through the evil effect.
- The intention or purpose must be good.
- There must be a proportionately good reason or cause for performing the action in the first place.

In other words, if doing something morally good has a morally bad side-effect, it is ethically permitted to be done provided that the bad side-effect was not intended. This is true even if you foresaw that the bad effect would probably happen. For instance, if a doctor gives drugs to a patient to relieve distressing symptoms even though he knows doing this will weaken patient's immunity, thus, may shorten his life, is morally absolved from the responsibility for the bad consequences. This is because the doctor is not aiming directly at killing the patient- the bad result of the patient's death is a side-effect of the good result of reducing the patient's pain.

There are several other actions that potentially have double effects. For instance, military fighter pilots/ tactical bombers encounter situations of double effect in times of war. The tactical bomber aims at military targets while foreseeing that bombing such targets will also cause civilian deaths. When his bombs kill civilians this is a foreseen, but unintended consequence of his actions, hence permissible.

Dimensions of Ethics

The dimensions of ethics (or moral philosophy) involve systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviour. Philosophers today usually divide ethical theories into four general subject areas: meta ethics, normative ethics, descriptive ethics and applied ethics.

While prescriptive or normative ethics, is the study of ethical theories that prescribe how people ought to act; meta-ethics, is the study of what ethical terms and theories actually refer to; descriptive ethics, also known as comparative ethics, is the study of people's beliefs about morality. In addition to this, applied ethics attempts to use philosophical methods to identify the morally correct course of action in various fields of everyday life.