

Moral Thinking: An Introduction To Values And Ethics

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Week - 01

Lecture -01

Introduction to Philosophy - 1

Hello everyone. Today we are about to start. This is the first lecture of the course on moral thinking, introducing values and ethics. Let's start in the beginning by talking about philosophy and before that also about the humanities and social sciences. Now many of you might be coming from different backgrounds to talk about this course. Some of you may have some experience in industry, some of you may have worked elsewhere, some of you may be coming here out of curiosity, some of us may be here out of need for an examination, for accreditation.

So there would be various needs. Now the need that I would be most happily catering to is the need for out of curiosity, that why should you do this particular course, why should you engage in moral thinking. And to start with, there are many hesitations that you come out with this course on moral thinking or whenever in general we talk about values or philosophy. So the word that we are always looking for is values and that's one of the few things that I will write on the board right now.

So when we are looking at values, we always have a difficulty that well, the specter of relativism comes to us that well, values are relative and can we at all talk about it, can there be theory about it, can there be a course about it. This is a question we will be tackling in detail in a subsequent lecture. But to start with and place the background why we are here and what is it that we hope to do when we are here is, first, what are the humanities and social sciences. So to many of you who may be unfamiliar to the humanities and social sciences, let me start by introducing a little bit about the humanities and social sciences as disciplines of study. So we are all knowledge bodies are seeking or all academic disciplines are seeking knowledge.

That's a common factor between all the disciplines that we come across in universities, institutes, in schools, textbook studies and in general also we are seeking knowledge. That's the most generic thing that we are coming about. Humanities in particular deals

with knowledge that happens to be emerging from us being humans. That also seems generic. That well, everything we come to know as humans.

As humans we inhabit a world, we have lived experience, we inhabit a world in which we have friends, relatives, we have societies. Unlike the natural world that we inhabit where we have rocks, stones, gravity and an abstract world in which we have straight lines, numbers, digits. So all of these worlds also interact with each other and they have certain things common amongst them. Say abstractions and concepts theorization. So all the worlds have a certain level of theorizations.

What is theorization? When we look at the particular instances and we abstract something general out of it. So in a very simplistic manner, this is what we do in theorization. So the humanities is peculiar unlike any other disciplines because it looks at the lived experience that comes to us from being human. That is what is humanities looking at it. And perhaps if we look at it differently that what does science do, what does social science do and why is social science a social plus science is when we are looking at the scientific method.

The scientific method is typically about looking at the world out there. The third person perspective on the world out there and abstracting theories out of there, looking at patterns out of there. Social sciences does that for using the same instruments for society. Whereas sciences does it for the natural world out there of rock, stones, flowers, asteroids and meteors. Social sciences does it for societies as a person.

Now this is a wide general simplification for you to just get an idea what this particularly means. In humanities we have various disciplines and in every study there is a component of humanities when we look at the component of interpretation. Let me give you an example. Say history can be both a science and a part of humanities. Humanities say when an archaeologist digs up and finds out artifacts from the past.

Now that is scientific. They carbon dated, they find that these are the pieces that were around this particular era. But the humanities component steps in, when we interpret or weave the story around it. What was the kind of life that people were living. So you can see archaeology in particular can be both humanities and science, when it looks at third perspective information trying to abstract features of the objects found.

That is scientific. But when it tries to weave the story as how those objects connect to the life lived in that time, that is humanities. This is basically humanities and social sciences just a cursory glance at it. And now let me come to philosophy. Philosophy which is a part of humanities like languages, like history.

These are all parts of humanities and every discipline also as a part of humanities. And again with this I would like to leave you with a caveat that looking at water tight boundary lines between disciplines is a rather futile task because what every discipline mingles when you are at an advanced level of study and if you can look at how India's national education policy is also evolving and blurring the boundaries between disciplines because we are learning there is a component of one discipline in another. So to look at disciplines as water tight boundaries would be trivializing knowledge and this classification is only required for you to make sense of what these disciplines are of where they are coming from. Now let's start with philosophy. What whys and hows.

What is philosophy? We will go through it in three parts that what is philosophy? Why should we philosophize? And how do you philosophize? These are the three components of the scheme of things under which we will go ahead. Okay, so what is philosophy? Now philosophy many of you must have heard a lot of funny to dark interpretations of what philosophy is. And very often more often than not there is a grain of truth in of course what is being said like when I chose to study philosophy my father told me that philosophy was the study for the lookout for a black cat in a dark room which does not exist. So it's actually a meaningless search for something. So those were the teasing words of my father in the beginning of my study of philosophy and I will be charitable to it and also try to interpret that there is a point in that that when we look at methodologies or frame of references and if you are looking at absolute answers right then our pursuit of knowledge is not in sync with the way knowledge is.

So any discipline or at the beginning of the journey of any discipline if you are looking at absolute answers that is perhaps you are going to be disappointed sooner or later because there will be a change belief systems are revised and knowledge per se is also eternally revisable. So anyway let us come back to philosophy. So philosophy is a method or an attitude to examine the foundations to question the current obvious and to articulate why the self-evident is self-evident. Let us go over these issues one by one. Philosophy is not a body of content that is given to you.

It is rather or more accurately an attitude. And what is that attitude? That attitude is to examine the foundations. The foundations of what seems to be the current or obvious frame of reference that we are surrounded with and then to articulate why the self-evident is self-evident. Let me put this in a simpler relatable perspective. Now we all have a default mechanism of going through life.

For some child could think that homework is boring. That is a default mechanism that we come across and that is how the child will go through perhaps their homework. But

when we pause and question why is the homework boring or what can be made to done to make it interesting or what is the nature of being bored is monotony boredom or is lack of visuals and actions boring then we are starting a philosophical pursuit because we are trying to interrogate that what is the meaning of boring over there. So whenever we look at things which are self-evident, say in today's political milieu we hold democracy as a desirable political goal. Now why is democracy as a desirable political goal and here is where is also the lure and the, if I may say disappointment with philosophers because they are not very grounded in what is the current state of affairs.

So it's not that they are looking at the world from a frame of reference. So those of you or at those moments when you have the keen insight to question why are things the way they are, you are wearing the philosophers cap and that is the moment you are being a philosopher. So philosophy is quite a generic enterprise and when you are questioning that why are things the way they are and articulating thereby that this is the position that we have that is the role of a philosopher. The second point listed here is philosophy as a second order study, as a philosophy of something, philosophy of education, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of biology. So when we look at a second order study, what is a second order study? A second order study is when one looks at the foundations of the first order study.

So think of an example that we are taught of numbers in school. We are taught of digits right from the beginning but then to explain what is a number or the concept of number it doesn't exist anywhere in the world. So we are entering into a second order study of mathematics. What is this concept of number? That is a second order study. When we look at philosophy of education, it is not what is to be transferred in education but how is it to be transferred and what is the point of education.

When we ask second order questions is when we are looking for foundational questions, foundational justifications, when you are looking for reasons. What does philosophy do? As the third point lists out, to believe in the possibility of articulation and argumentation, to look for the fundamentals of learning and knowledge. So to believe in the possibility of articulation and argumentation. Now very often you would see that discussions amongst friends or committees or groups of people tend to become or tend to end at loggerheads and people are disagreeing with each other and their final parting statement is we agree to disagree. And so debate, so there is one strain of thinking that says that well there is no point of debate because each one is committed to their own views.

And that means when you come into a committee or in a group discussion or in a debate or in the parliament, if each one is just arguing for their view, then one is not being philosophical. One ought to argue for one's view but also be open to learn from the

other's view. So to be philosophical is to be open to new views, to argue and to believe in the power of argumentation both to convince and to get convinced. So when we are looking for the fundamental questions, we are being philosophical. And finally as listed here, transcendental.

Now transcendental is a word that may be a little heavy weight but it is appropriate in this concept that to be or philosophy is transcendental in the sense because it is transcending in time and perspective. Let me take a moment to explain that to you. What is it to transcend in time and perspective? Well connecting to the first point mentioned here is that when we look at a frame of reference that exists today. Let us think of, see how Youngers address Elders. Now one way as you are embedded into a society or as an organisation or a family, you find that well there is a particular way that Youngers address the Elders, in whichever society or organisation that you are a part of it.

And you quickly adapt to it, even very often probably unthinkingly or naturally without thinking why it is the way it is. And what does it signify? So philosophy being transcendental is to transcend that immediacy of the moment, and to look at why certain practices come into being. So when there are practices, there is a reason why these practices evolve. And to understand, you have to liberate yourself from the present moment, from the way the practice has to be followed. So why did this practice evolve? What does this practice signify about the broader values of the organisation, or the system, or the family.

So whenever we are able to transcend in time and perspective, not think and work in the short run, and to place our little bubble of existence in the larger scheme of things, we are being philosophical. So it's very, the moments and perhaps many of you who have a literary flare, can relate to this very easily. When in one of your literary moments, you seem to have a feeling of finiteness, when surrounded or when comprehending the infinity of the world around you. That is transcendental. That is when one looks at one's little position, in the whole world around us.

So if that sounds too poetic, well some of you may be able to relate to it, and for some of you it may be abstruse. The crux that you can take from here is that, to transcend the immediate frame of reference, to look beyond the frame of reference, to question the existing practices. If democracy is a valuable goal today, why is it so? Now, the big question that, why philosophise? Why at all should one philosophise? Well, first, can we help, but not to philosophise. To be aware of oneself, and one's awareness of this ability, also known as self-consciousness, is the foundation of philosophy. So the first argument is that, the one that I even referred to, or eluded to right at the beginning, is that, we do

philosophise, because we are fundamentally curious creatures.

We want to understand things. Right. So, the desire to philosophy is a desire, to make sense of the world around us. Curiosity. Curiosity is the fundamental motivation to philosophise. So, if many of you have seen, typical statues of Socrates or Plato, you see them in a thinking mode, sitting and thinking and reflecting. So, that is when one particularly has transcended the immediate needs of the moment, and trying to make sense of the world, and one's place in the world.

So, philosophising is inevitable to the thinking person. Curiosity about the world, our place in it, and the structure of it. That is the spark to seek. To make sense of it all, to reconcile and revel in the human condition. So, what does it mean to make sense of it all, to reconcile and revel in the human condition.

Whether to reconcile or to revel, that is of course an option, depending on the philosophical position that you hold. That whether world is something that you should revel in, or you should reconcile. These are two world views.

Right. A Philosopher has a world view. So, Philosophical content can be contradictory to each other. So, Philosophy per se, does not give you advocate a body of content. So, when we say, even talk about, in this particular course about Moral Thinking, we are not going to tell or talk about, what is the right thing to do. But, more importantly, we are trying to understand, what are the value assumptions of each side of the argument. That will help us to debate better, to argue better, and then to arrive at a conclusion.

If there is a annoying trouble, let me address it right away, that well, if everybody has their point of view, then how are we at all going to arrive at a position. Look at our parliaments. The parliaments of the world argue and debate to arrive at policies. Now, is there a singular way of arriving at a policy or at a debate? No. So, different parliamentarians come together, put forth their points, and try to argue, and to come up with a policy, that is best suitable to the immediate requirement.

Is that policy, eternal or absolute? No. It can always be reversed, in the next session, or in the next decade. So, policies change, does not mean that, policies are self-contradictory. So, to look at truth in human condition, in absolute terms, can lead us to the folly of scepticism or cynicism, that well, nothing is for sure. Things are for sure. But, things are for sure, in their epoch, in their time, in their frame of reference.

And that is what, we need to understand. So, more of this, when we come to the topic ahead. Why Philosophy? And now, if these reasons do not convince you much, well,

and if you would like to have reasons of the world, that means in the world, that why should one philosophise at all. The practical reason to philosophise, is to bring about a change, to understand, why are things and systems, the way they are, and then, how to make them better. So, Philosophy is the primal urge to learn and make sense of the world, both outer and inner. And thus, this is the foundation of all knowledge endeavours.

Okay, let me now put forth that, what do we mean by change. So, there are leaders, there are organisational leaders, there are national leaders, there are world leaders, who try to bring some change. And, I am assuming an individual leadership, trying to make a change. How is change brought about? Change is brought about by, discontent with the present. Change is also brought about people, or individuals, who have reflected on, that why the current assumptions do not work, or can be bettered.

Right. So, anybody who looks for a change, a thinking change, not just fuelled by the discontent with the present, but with a more thorough understanding of, what are the policies of the present, and why they do not work, and why they should be changed, at a core level. Say, I can think of immediately, Martin Luther King, trying to do away with arguing for fighting against Slavery. Now, when such visionaries, they are philosophers for sure, they are wearing the Philosopher's cap, when they have looked at the world around them, and unlike most others, have not reconciled to the immediate frame of reference, as the inevitable and final frame of reference. So, what is it not to be Philosophical, is when one unquestioningly reconciles, or unquestioningly accepts the frame of reference, in which one is thrown into. Thrown into is typically a Philosophical word, it means that when the world that we are born into, we do not choose the governments, we do not choose the society, we do not choose the civilization, but we are thrown into it per se.

So, we know that, okay, at this time, individual of the world, if you are born in say, 21st century, you will think individual liberty, and privacy are sacred values. If you were born say, 400 years back, you would think community and the collective are more cherished ideals. Only when one understands the frame of reference, can one think of making a change. So, that is a reason, why one would like to change. And Philosophical thinking should empower you, to look at a change, that is not just an immediate discontent with the present, but also a thought through transition, from a current frame of reference, to another frame of reference.

So, Visionaries. Visionaries, world leaders, statesmen, founders of great institutions, and organisations, and companies, have always had that visionary Philosophical streak in them, where they have been able to envision a new world order. And that is possible,

because one has thought through the existing world order, and understood its Philosophical, or its assumptions, and then the need and desire to change it. Now, to the next question that, how to philosophize. Now that is, well, if you would see till now, questions about Philosophy, or this talk about Philosophy, may appear vague to some, and I understand where that comes from. But when we look at questions of knowledge, techniques are less effective.

So okay, let me put that in perspective. Now, if I give you a body of techniques, these are easy to apply. The typical difference between *Techne*, and *Episteme*. As let me put it down here. Now, *Techne* is to do with technique, that when one gives techniques of an way of doing something, one is learning techniques, and that techniques can when implemented, can lead you to that skill.

But *Episteme* is when we look at knowledge. Let me think of an example. The first example that comes to my mind is, when you are learning to drive, or ride a motorbike, or drive a car, the techniques of it are explained to you by the instructor. There is a clutch, if it is a manual vehicle, there is an accelerator, there is an accelerator that increases the engine that drives you, the way you turn. So these are all techniques, techniques which you master, you are able to drive. But *Episteme* is to look at it that, why should one stick to one side of the road.

So in one part of the world, you should stick to the left lane, in another part of the world, you should stick to the right lane. But what is the point of this, to understand the theory of an internal combustion engine. When we are looking at knowledge for knowledge sake, not as a set of techniques. So when we are looking at techniques, it gives us simplicity, it gives us a few instruments, that we can use to achieve our goal. But when we look at *Episteme*, and philosophy is characteristic *Episteme*, which looks at knowledge per se, knowledge by itself.

So where you can look at, why things are the way they are. So if you look at a session on techniques, it is generally about the way of doing things. There are very rarely, the why questions answered there. So when we look at *Episteme*, the why questions are handled in detail. So the first prerequisite to philosophize is to have an open mind, to think for oneself.

Question question and question. So those of you, we are all born philosophers, as children, we have so many questions. An average child may be asking a 1000 questions a day, to the point of their parents being baffled. But some parents also encourage and enjoy those questions. So we look at, we start with a questioning apparatus. With time, we see the inefficiency of questioning and maybe we slow down that apparatus.

So questioning is fundamental to philosophers and throughout the history of the world, philosophers have known to ask very embarrassing, difficult and provoking questions, questions that have landed them into deep trouble also. Once you question, look at the established answers, but do not follow them blindly. So all questions are answered, or questions of life are answered, in the life that we exist. A world order, a civilization performs, has answers embedded in those questions.

So one should be cognizant of those answers. And that means, the role of reading and knowledge is tremendous in Philosophical Thinking. Because one knows, what are the answers there. Then to resist simple explanations, and then come up with your answers, to what are the possibilities elsewhere. Stop for now, and we will talk about the Art and Craft, in the next session. Thank you. .