

Moral Thinking: An Introduction To Values And Ethics

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Week - 02

Lecture -08

Introducing Moral Terms

Hello everyone, today we start the second module of this course on Moral Thinking. And in this module, we will talk about some concepts and look at them philosophically, how they make sense of us. So we will look at good, right, duty, justice, equality, love, purusharthas. And of course, we have talked about Egoism, Ethical Relativism, and Universalism, in certain details. So, today, I am going to just brief you out in this session about, what is the problematic about these concepts that we talk about, the notion of good. Now, if you look at the notion of good, good is something, and if you start come down to define, or if you are asked to define, what good is, try this exercise, and you will find yourself in a pondery.

It is easy to identify, what is good. We have a sense of identifying a good person, a good human being. But when asked to elaborate, or define what we mean by good, there arises the difficulty. And this is in general, the phenomenon with philosophical terms.

Because philosophical terms are also terms that we use in day-to-day life, in our colloquial world, and lived experience that we inhabit. Yet, when we are asked to define it, when we expect a certain level of accuracy, rigour, or tightness to these concepts, it starts becoming difficult. And that is where, we have the need to theorise it. And how we theorise these crucial moral concepts, also determines, as we have earlier seen, the character of the individual, organisation, constitution, nation, state. So how do we articulate them.

So, let us take a simple notion as good. Now, when we look at good, what do we mean by good. A good can be something like, a good knife, and a good person. Right. Would these two be the same.

And that is a question, that opens up the difficulty, or in a certain sense, the ambiguity in the meaning of the word, good. So, good has a meaning, a sense of being functional.

So, a good knife is a knife that cuts well. Whereas, a good person is not a person, who is excellent in any particular ability, but it is a moral sense of the term. Right.

And that itself, and this is a discourse, a lot of philosophical discourse has taken place in defining, what do we mean by this term, good. And we will come about to it, in some detail, in the next session. But, just to open you up, that this is, what is the problematic around this idea, and why shall we, or why can we not accept our colloquial understanding of the good. And here, let me take a step back, and emphasise that, how do we handle differences, differences of opinion. And, what are basically differences of opinion.

Differences of opinion are the differences in the articulation of philosophical terms, in our worldview. Right. Let me repeat that. Differences in opinion, are the articulation of philosophical terms, philosophical concepts, in our worldview. So, if we want to engage with difference, if you want to understand the other, if you want to argue, argue, and not quarrel with the other, argue in the spirit of learning, in the spirit of arriving at the truth, or at an equilibrium, we need to understand the other's point of view.

And it is here, what we hold, or how we articulate, how we understand these philosophical terms, will help us make sense of, what does the other position mean. So, just as a good person, in certain milieu, may mean somebody who is kind and charitable. In certain other conditions, it may mean somebody who is pleasing, and who is comforting. So, there is a variation on, how we understand good. And, it is far more complicated, than we come out to be.

Let us look at the second term. Let us look at rights. And, two ways of, right is also, when you understand it in the terms of, as opposed to wrong, and as human rights, right, as rights that one has, rights as a sense of entitlement. So, to judge, well, most of the time, it is easy to make a judgement. But especially, when we are unthinking about the terms, as has been articulated by the other.

So, when one is expected to take a judgement, which involves a term, say, making a call of right and wrong, one needs to understand the frame of reference, from which right and wrong is defined. Sense of duty. Duty seems something fairly. Now, let me put it in forms of certain questions. And, you are suppose employed, then, or you are a student, your duty is to study.

So, given that your position is emanating from your position or station in life, there are certain duties that emanate from your position or situation in life. But how do you make a priority between these call for duties. Say, what you have been paid for, if you receive

a salary for something, does that become your duty, exceeding the duty that comes to you, as being a child or a sibling. And what is it, that powers duty. And then, there are philosophers like, Immanuel Kant, what rigorous claims that they make, that all moral life is through a sense of duty.

And duty is very well understood, in contrast with love. So, Immanuel Kant went ahead, and his claims implied that, when one indulges in an act of assistance, from the sense of duty, it is right. But when one indulgence from an act of assistance, from love or emotion, it turns out to be incorrect. So, there seems to be a conflict between duty and love, that functioning out of duty, and functioning out of love. Depending on the civilisation or milieu that you subscribe to, one might look at duty as something superior to acts powered by love.

One may look at acts powered by love, as superior to power by duty. And here again, like we discussed earlier, the judgement is not exclusively on the nature of the act, but the motivations of the act. The same act can be from a sense of love, or from a sense of duty. And when these two moral motivations, conflict, which is the one that needs to be chosen. So, what is the kind of frame of reference that we build, that whether we should function out of duty, or functioning out of love.

Now, if you look at the example of the Bhakti Marg, in Indian Philosophical tradition, they will play a lot of emphasis on love. That it is, the moral urge emanates out of love, vis-a-vis, if you look at the sense of duty. And, I think classically, one can understand military service as a sense of being powered by the sense of duty. That well, it is a duty that has to be done, irrespective of whether one feels for it, or does not feel for it. It is duty, and therefore it has to be done.

So, in that sense, it seems mechanical, it seems loveless. So, we will push this, I would not say dichotomy, but this tension between duty and love, as two moral motivators. Then let us look at this notion of justice. Now, justice is quite a deeply, not problematic, but a moral notion that, that accelerates a lot of emotions and feelings. So, if you look at justice, you find that well, two groups that are probably protesting, maybe in a school, maybe in a college, or maybe out there in a democratic country, both very often seem to be fighting for justice.

And, both seem to be claiming that, we want justice. And, both are like loggerheads also. So, for one segment, justice is say, X. And for the other segment, justice is not X. So, both are fighting for justice, but how is justice to be defined.

Let us take a simple example, to flesh it out into an example, so that one can make

sense of this. If X has been wronged by Y, then, so Y should be punished by X or Z, Z here being the third party. Now, if you look at, if two parties are in dispute with each other, and one has wronged the other, and that is established, who has this authority to establish it, and who has the authority to administer punishment. Say certain, or medieval senses of justice in many parts of the world, always meant that well, if X has been wronged by Y, or then Y has to inflict an equal damage on X, and that settles justice. That revenge is also an action of justice.

Most modern democracies function on that well. If X has been wronged by Y, it is the state, Z, which will give a punishment to X. So, when we introduce a third person, or a third party that arbitrates, and awards punishment, that turns out to be justice. Right. Now, then let us look at, Equality.

Now, Equality is again a term, it is a favourite term. And, most people would say that, we want Equality, we fight for Equality, we vouch for Equality. But, what is Equality? Equality of outcome, equality of opportunity, equality of what kind of equality. And that is where, the difference in the formation of equality, difference in the articulation of equality, comes into being. So, one level of equality, may be equality of opportunity, that all of us deserve an equal opportunity.

But, can that be ever possible. Because, the genes that you are endowed with, is something that has come to you, from your parents, from your family line. Can that, or should that be neutralised in a race. So, if one looks at equality of opportunity, to what level can it be done. Equality of outcome is, well, no matter what you earn, say you should be taxed, according to as you earn, so that all of us at the end of the day, are equally rich, or equally poor. How many of you would vote for such a policy.

So, what exactly do we mean by equality, and the articulations of equality. So, it is very often possible that, opposing protesters, protesters opposing each other, both vouch for equality, and both are asking for equality, but have different renditions of equality. And finally, we will come to the notion of Purusharthas. Purusharthas would mean, what is the goals of human life, according to Indian Philosophy. So, the goals of life, as put out, and a lot of it can be understood in moral terms.

And many of us may be familiar as, Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha, as the goals of human life. So, some things that gives meaning to human life. So, these are some of the concepts. There are many concepts that we come across. But, these are some of the concepts that, after this very introductory course, you should be able to see the debate behind it.

You should be able to identify, what kind or what interpretation of a particular concept is used in an argument, or in a policy, or in a state, or in a person. So, to first open yourself to look at the possible variations in interpretations. And then, to be able to identify the interpretations, that we have. So, with this, do think over, what kind of interpretations that you have come across, and where you see a difference. A philosophy class is successful, where there is difference.

Because then, we are able to see a variation in interpretation, and thereby start a dialogue. So, with this, we have a brief introduction of, what is going to be done in Module 2. Maybe a little bit on Egoism and Altruism. But, most of it has been covered in the first module. So, we will look at it, as a Gursery glance, as how it can be revised, or put in terms of moral vocabulary.

So, the idea for you to do, after this course, is that, you should be able to construct a moral argument. You should be able to identify, sorry, first identify the moral positions held. And then, construct moral argument, using moral concepts, thereby doing, what very often is called as, Ethical Decision Making. Okay. .