



**ETHICS**

**School of Inter-Disciplinary and Trans-Disciplinary Studies  
(SOITS)**

**Indira Gandhi National Open University  
New Delhi**

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## COURSE INTRODUCTION

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Ethics or Moral Philosophy as a branch of philosophy offers a systemic study of the concepts and principles essential for distinguishing good and bad human conduct. Ethics is concerned with what is Good (*Shreya*, a concept of Indian Philosophy, and culture) for individual or society. Ethical theories are usually divided into three areas: Metaethics, Normative Ethics and Applied Ethics. Metaethics investigates the meaning and origin of ethical principles and concepts. What is the meaning of “good”, what is the nature of moral statements? Are moral statements merely emotive judgments or merely prescription? Can ethical statements be true or false? Such questions are discussed in Metaethics. Normative ethics on the other hand formulates principles and standards for evaluating human conduct. It tells us what we ought to do or what we ought not to do. It discusses ways of deriving the principles as well as ways justifying those. Applied ethics, in contrast, is concerned with application normative principles in practical problems. It may also refer to Metaethical theories to solve a practical ethical problem. Applied ethics examines controversial but practically significant specific issues, such as infanticide, abortion, euthanasia, animal rights, environmental concerns, homosexuality, capital punishment etc. The three areas of ethics are interrelated and actually are just different aspects of same entity, i.e., ethics. For example, if we want to examine the issue of animal rights, one can apply here utilitarianism or any other relevant normative principles. But this may further lead to metaethical issues like what “right” means and whether that meaning can be applied in case of animals. Ethics thus provides us a toolkit for evaluating an action as good or bad. It is not necessary it will always provide a solution to a problem. The objective of this course is to offer a philosophical background for basic ethical debates and concepts. The units use the Indian context to simplify the theories and provide easier examples for the students.

The present course on “Ethics” consists of 3 blocks and 14 units. This updated course gives more detailed emphasis on Normative Ethics and Metaethics. Keeping in view the increasing significance of Applied Ethics it has been developed as a separate course.

**Block 1** deals with “Basic Concepts” of ethics. This block gives an introduction to ethics, discusses what stands as a moral action, what is virtue and vice, concepts of moral law and concept of moral relativism.

**Block 2** is about “Western Ethical Theories”. This block discusses most important western normative theories like Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics, Immanuel Kant’s Deontological Ethics and J. S. Mill’s Consequentialist Ethics. A last unit of this block offers critical appraisals of these three theories.

**Block 3** offers a more comprehensive account on “Meta-Ethics”. It discusses the fundamental notions of Metaethics, the debate between Ethical Naturalism and Non-Naturalism, David Hume’s perspective on Subjectivism, Charles Stevenson’s theory of Emotivism and R. M. Hare’s account of Prescriptivism

The three blocks as a whole form an introduction to ethics. The concepts and theories of the two main fields of ethics- Normative Ethics and Metaethics are contained in the contents of this course.



**Block-1**  
**Basic Concepts**

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## BLOCK INTRODUCTION

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**Block 1** “Basic Concepts” having five units deals with the various concepts, constituent elements, and presuppositions involved in Ethics and its study. Studying these concepts at the very beginning will enable learners to understand the scope and significance of Ethics and also the various ethical theories, evolved in thousands years journey of human interaction with each other and involvement of one life into the other life and also human reflection on one’s own self and other.

**Unit 1** “Introduction to Ethics” discusses layman as well as philosophers’ understanding of ethics. It also tries to show why Ethics is a branch of Philosophy. This unit draws a historical sketch of the development of moral philosophy or ethics. In this unit, the learners will understand the scope and significance of Ethical studies in our day to day life. This unit tries to show the difference between Ethics and morality.

**Unit 2** “Moral Action” deals with the concept of moral action in the sphere of human being. This unit is an attempt to define moral action and discuss the conditions, presumptions and constituents to make an action a moral one.

**Unit 3** “Virtue and Vices” discusses virtue and vices. In this unit, the learners will learn and understand why one action is virtuous and another is vice. This unit also focuses on the understanding of virtue and vices in various religions and philosophical traditions.

**Unit 4** “Moral Law” is about morality as a law. Moral law means objective and universal moral principle or understanding of right and wrong. In this unit, the learners will see what are the implications and the consequences when we take moral principle as a natural moral law.

**Unit 5** “Moral Relativism” discusses morality as a relative phenomenon. Every society or cultural has its own understanding of morality and moral principles. The basic thesis of moral relativism is that, that there is no possibility to have an objective criterion to judge an action accepted in a society or culture. Not only moral principle, but also moral criteria or standard is culture-specific. Moral relativism can be extended up to subjectivism.

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# UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS\*

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Scope of Ethics
- 1.3 History of Ethics
- 1.4 The Methods of Ethics
- 1.5 Different Approaches to the Study of Ethics
- 1.6 Division of Ethics
- 1.7 Ethics and Other Sciences
- 1.8 Ethics and Religion
- 1.9 Importance of Studying Ethics
- 1.10 Why Should We be Moral?
- 1.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.12 Key Words
- 1.13 Further Readings and References
- 1.14 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objective of this unit is to introduce you to ‘ethics’ or moral philosophy. Ethics is a wide topic. Through the analysis of its various aspects we can learn:

- the nature and the different aspects of ethics
- how ethics developed as a systematic philosophical discipline in the western philosophy
- the methods, different approaches and the division of ethics
- how ethics is related to other sciences
- the relationship between ethics and religion
- the importance of studying ethics in the context of today and the need for being moral.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Etymologically the term “ethics” corresponds to the Greek word “*ethos*” which means character, habit, customs, ways of behaviour, etc. Ethics is also called “moral philosophy”. The word “moral” comes from Latin word “*mores*” which signifies customs, character, behaviour, etc. Thus ethics *may be defined as the systematic study of human actions from the point of view of their rightfulness or*

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\*Dr. Wilson Jose, St. John's College, Kondadaba.

*wrongfulness, as means for the attainment of the ultimate happiness.* It is the reflective study of what is good or bad in that part of human conduct for which humans have some personal responsibility. In simple words ethics refers to what is good and the way to get it, and what is bad and how to avoid it. It refers to what ought to be done to achieve what is good and what ought not to be done to avoid what is evil.

As a philosophical discipline, ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live. It also involves the justification of these values and guidelines. It is not merely following a tradition or custom. Instead it requires analysis and evaluation of these guidelines in light of universal principles. As moral philosophy, ethics is the philosophical thinking about morality, moral problems, and moral judgements.

Ethics is a science in as much as it is a set or body of reasoned truths organised in a logical order and having its specific material and formal objects. It is a rational science in so far as its principles are deduced by human's reason from the objects that concern the free will. Besides it has for its ulterior end the art by which humans may live uprightly or comfortably to right reason. It is a normative/regulative science in as much as it regulates and directs human's life and gives the right orientation to one's existence.

Ethics is also theoretical and practical. It is theoretical in as much as it provides the fundamental principles on the basis of which moral judgements are arrived at. It is practical in as much as it is concerned about an end to be gained, and the means of attaining it.

Ethics is sometimes distinguished from morality. In such cases, ethics is the explicit philosophical reflection on moral beliefs and practices while morality refers to the first-order beliefs and practices about good and evil by means of which we guide our behaviour (e.g. music and musicology). However, in most cases they are referred to as having the same meaning.

Ethics is not merely a set of 'codes'. Ethics certainly deals with moral codes yet one cannot identify ethics to moral codes. Ethics is not primarily to restrict one's behaviour, rather to help one to find what is good and how to get it. The obligatory character of ethical norms derives from the very purpose of ethical enquiry, i.e. to discover the most ultimate principles of explanation or the most ultimate reasons why one ought to do anything.

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## 1.2 SCOPE OF ETHICS

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Ethics deals with voluntary actions. We can distinguish between human actions and actions of human: human actions are those actions that are done by human consciously, deliberately and in view of an end. Actions of human may not be wilfully, voluntarily, consciously and deliberately done but all the same they are done by human (e.g. sleeping, walking, etc.). It is the intention which makes the difference between human action and action of human. In ethics we deal only with human actions.

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## 1.3 HISTORY OF ETHICS

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The first ethical precepts were certainly passed down by word of mouth by parents and elders, but as societies learned to use the written word, they began to set



down their ethical beliefs. These records constitute the first historical evidence of the origins of ethics.

In as much as it is the study of human behaviour, we cannot really trace the history of ethics. However, as a systematic study of human behaviour, we can point out how ethics evolved as a discipline. It is not that we have first a straightforward history of moral concepts and then a separate and secondary history of philosophical comment. To set out to write the history of moral philosophy involves a careful selection from the past of what falls under the heading of moral philosophy as we now conceive it. We have to strike a balance between the danger of a dead antiquarianism, which enjoys the illusion that we can approach the past without preconceptions, and the other of believing that the whole point of the past was that it should culminate with us. However, we can observe a gradual development in the ethical thought from the beginning to our day.

In *Rgveda* (It is accepted that *Rgveda* is the first example/text of human wisdom; the vaidika tradition was oral tradition; pass from one generation to another generation.) we find the concept of *Rta*. *Rta* means the cosmological as well as moral law. We can consider the concept of *Rta* as the first example of human pursuit towards moral philosophy. In Indian philosophy, besides moral codification, there is much debate on moral principles. We can see *Purusartha* as the aim of human life. Human beings cannot know and attain the meaning and the highest goal of life without moral life. For example, *Sādhanachaṭustaya* (śam, dam etc.) must for the preparation to Moksha (See, Saṅkara's advaita Vedāntā). Buddhism, Jainism and even materialist philosophical tradition Cārvāka developed the foundation of Moral Philosophy. *Satya, Ahimsā, Astey, Aparigrah, Brahmacharya* are the basic moral pillars accepted by almost all Indian philosophical schools, but the metaphysics to establish them is different in different schools. Buddhist establishes and interprets them with the help of *anattā* (no-soul, no external reality) metaphysics, Jainism establishes them with the help of *anekāntavāda* and so on.

In the Western Philosophy, the history of ethics can be traced back to the fifth century B.C with the appearance of Socrates. As a philosopher among the Greeks his mission was to awaken his fellow humans to the need for rational criticism of their beliefs and practices. It was the time, when the philosophers began to search for reasons for established modes of conduct. Socrates, in demanding rational grounds for ethical judgements, brought attention to the problem of tracing, the logical relationship between values and facts and thereby created ethical philosophy. Plato's theory of forms could be seen as the first attempt at defending moral realism and offering an objective ground for moral truths. From the *Republic* on through the later dialogues and epistles, Plato constructed a systematic view of nature, God, and human from which one derived one's ethical principles. His main goal in his ethical philosophy was to lead the way toward a vision of the Good. Aristotle differed from Plato in his method of inquiry and his conception of the role of ethical principles in human affairs. While Plato was the fountainhead of religious and idealistic ethics, Aristotle engendered the naturalistic tradition. Aristotle's ethical writings (i.e. the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the *Politics*) constitute the first systematic investigation into the foundations of ethics. Aristotle's account of the virtues could be seen as one of the first sustained inquiries in normative ethics. It was a clear mixture of Greco-Roman thought with Judaism and elements of other Middle Eastern religions.

The medieval period was dominated by the thoughts of philosophers and theologians like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. The influence of Christianity dominated the ethical scenario. So much so that during this period philosophy and religion were nearly indistinguishable. The rise of Christian philosophy produced a new era of history of ethics. In St. Augustine, the most prominent philosopher of the early medieval period, ethics became a blend of the pursuit of earthly well-being with preparation of the soul for eternal salvation. The next towering figure of medieval philosophy is Thomas Aquinas. He brought about a true reconciliation between Aristotelian science and philosophy with Augustinian theology. Aquinas greatly succeeded in proving the compatibility of Aristotelian naturalism with Christian dogma and constructing a unified view of nature, human, and God.

The social and political changes that characterized the end of the medieval period and the rise of the modern age of industrial democracy gave rise to a new wave of thinking in the ethical field. The development of commerce and industry, the discovery of new regions of the world, the Reformation, the Copernican and Galilean revolutions in science, and the rise of strong secular governments demanded new principles of individual conduct and social organization. Some of the modern philosophers who contributed to the great changes in ethical thinking were Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Benedict de Spinoza, John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill and Friedrich Nietzsche. Further developments in ethical thinking in the west came with Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Here we are not intending to give a detailed analysis of their contribution to ethics. However, the most influential ethical thought during this period were the Utilitarianism, dominated by British and French Philosophy (e.g. Locke, Hume, Bentham, Stuart Mill) and Idealistic ethics in Germany and Italy (e.g. Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche).

The contemporary ethical scenario is a further complex area of study. The contemporary European ethics in the broadest sense attempts to cover a generous range of philosophies running from phenomenology to theories of communicative action. The conditions of contemporary civilization forced philosophers to seek a genuine ground for ethics and moral life. In much of the English speaking world G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) is taken to be the starting point of contemporary ethical theory. Others like Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Levinas, Max Scheler, Franz Brentano and John Dewey too have made significant contributions to ethical thinking in other parts of the world.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Write a short note on the development of ethics in the western philosophy.

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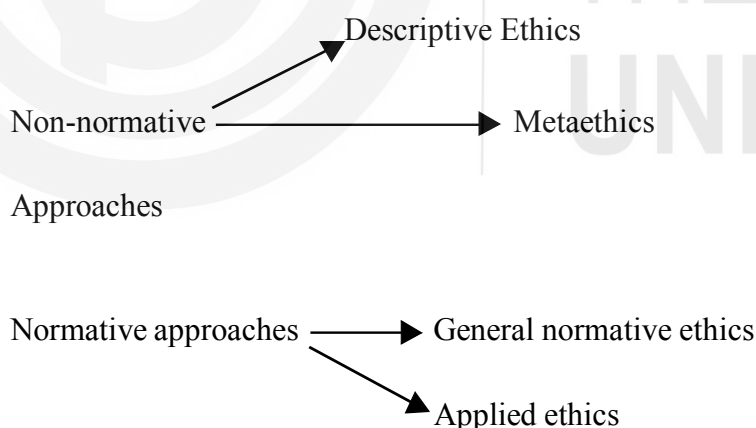
## 1.4 THE METHODS OF ETHICS

Ethics, as a philosophical discipline, makes use of the methods used in philosophy. Thus in ethics, both the inductive method and deductive methods are used. Deduction is a process of gaining knowledge independently of experience through pure logical reasoning. Deductive reasoning begins with a universal or general truth and leads to knowledge of a particular instance of it. The classical form of deductive reasoning is the syllogism in which a necessary conclusion is derived from two accepted premises: e.g. All men are mortal, A is a man, and therefore, A is mortal. Induction is a process of arriving at knowledge through experience. Induction begins with the particular and moves to the universal, a generalization that accounts for other examples of the same category or class. For instance, if a number of ravens have been observed, all of which are black, and if no raven has been encountered that is not black, the inferences to the conclusion that the next observed raven will be black or to the general conclusion that all ravens are black, are inductive inferences.

However, in ethics the inductive method (particular to the universal) is generally preferred to the deductive (universal to the particular).

## 1.5 DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF ETHICS

There are basically four different approaches to the study of ethics. Tom L. Beauchamp, in his book *Philosophical Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* presents them with the following diagram:



The non-normative approaches examine morality without concern for making judgements as to what is morally right or wrong. They do not take any moral position regarding moral issues. The normative approaches instead make judgements as to what is morally right or wrong. They take a clear moral position regarding moral issues.

Among the two non-normative approaches to ethics, *descriptive ethics* describe and sometimes try to explain the moral and ethical practices and beliefs of certain societies and cultures. This is what sociologists, anthropologists, and historians often do in their study and research. In their descriptions they do not make

judgements about the morality of the practices and beliefs but simply describe the practices observed in the different groups or cultures. *Metaethics* focuses on the analysis of the meanings of the central terms used in ethical reasoning and decision-making. It attempts to answer questions of meaning.

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## 1.6 DIVISION OF ETHICS

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The whole study of ethics can be divided into General Ethics (nature of moral activity, norm of morality, foundation of morality, end of morality, etc) and Special Ethics (applies the principles of general ethics to the various actions of human activity).

However, when we consider the ethical theories, philosophers today usually divide them into three general subject areas: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Metaethics investigates the origin and meaning of ethical concepts. It studies where our ethical principles come from and what they mean. It tries to analyse the underlying principles of ethical values; Normative ethics tries to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. It is a more practical task. It is a search for an ideal litmus test of proper behaviour; applied ethics involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, environmental concerns, homosexuality, and so on. In applied ethics, using the conceptual tools of metaethics and normative ethics, one tries to resolve these controversial issues.

Often the lines of distinction between metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics are often blurry. For instance, the issue of abortion is an applied ethical topic in as much as it involves a specific type of controversial behaviour. But it is also an issue involving normative principles such as the right of self-rule and the right to life and an issue having metaethical issues such as, “where do rights come from?” and “what kind of beings have rights?”.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. How ethics uses deductive method?

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2. Write a short note on the division of ethics.

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## 1.7 ETHICS AND OTHER SCIENCES

In our analysis of the definition and nature of ethics, we have seen that ethics as a science is concerned with an end or ideal or standard. Most sciences, instead, are concerned with certain uniformities of our experience – with the ways in which certain classes of objects (such as rocks or plants) are found to exist, or with the ways in which certain classes of events (such as phenomena of sound or electricity) are found to occur. These sciences have no direct reference to any end that is to be achieved or to any ideal by reference to which the facts are judged.

Ethics is distinguished from the natural sciences, inasmuch as it has a direct reference to an end that human persons desire to attain. Although ethics is sometimes regarded as a practical science, it is not a ‘practical science’ as medicine, engineering or architecture is as much as it is not directed towards the realization of a definite result.

Other sciences		Ethics
Psychology	How a man behaves (descriptive science)	How a man MUST behave (normative science)
Anthropology	Nature of Human Beings and Its Activity	How man’s actions OUGHT to be
Social And Political Sciences	Deals with the organization of man’s social and political life	How man’s social and political life MUST or OUGHT TO BE organized in order to be moral
Economics	Concerned with <i>goods</i> , i.e. with those objects which are the means of satisfying any human want.	Deals with those acts which are the conditions of the attainment of the highest end of life.

## 1.8 ETHICS AND RELIGION

Ethics has no necessary connection with any particular religion. However, it is sometimes argued that without God or religion, ethics would have no point; and therefore insofar as God or religion is in question, so is ethics. This is evidently unacceptable. Although belief in God or religion can be an added reason for our being moral, it is not necessary to relate it to God or to any religion. The fact that ethics exists in all human societies shows that ethics is a natural phenomenon that arises in the course of the evolution of social, intelligent, long-lived mammals who possess the capacity to recognize each other and to remember the past behaviour of others.

Critics of religion such as Marx and Nietzsche saw religion as a profound source of social conformity, as a means of maintaining the status quo and keeping people confined to their existing social and economic positions. Yet there is another face of religion, one which suggests that religion may be a profoundly liberating force in an individual’s lives and an important force for social change.

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## 1.9 IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING ETHICS

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Today, more than ever, the importance of ethics is felt at every sphere of human living. The situation in the present world is characterised by an increasing rate in crime, with no end to such increase in sight. Besides, the power of traditional religions to inspire moral conduct continues to decline. Terrorism, civil wars, industrial pollution, planned obsolescence, misleading advertising, deceptive labelling, crooked insurance adjusting, unfair wages, crime syndicates, illegal gambling, forced prostitution, high jacking, match-fixing... so many are the prevailing trends. Truly, there seems to be hardly a few areas in life remain untouched by growing demoralization. The question that one may ask in this precarious situation is: Are we being sucked into a moral vacuum? Is this our way to the end of ethics?

We can point out at least three reasons why we should study ethics. First, the study of moral philosophy or ethics can deepen our reflection on the ultimate questions of life. The study of ethics helps a person to look at his own life critically and to evaluate his actions/choices/decisions. It assists a person in knowing what he/she really is and what is best for him/her and what he/she has to do in order to attain it.

Second, the study of moral philosophy can help us to think better about morality. Moral philosophy can help us to clarify our moral positions when we make judgements. It improves our perspective, and makes it more reflective and better thought out. It can also improve our thinking about specific moral issues. In our everyday life we are confronted with situations in which we have to decide what is the correct course of action and what is to be avoided. Whether we choose to act or to refrain from acting, we are in either case making a choice. Every decision or choice we make we do so for reasons. However, we should agree that some of these reasons are better than the others in judging the rightness of the decision or choice. However, there seems to be a common agreement that we should all strive to do the right thing, to do what is morally acceptable in a given situation or circumstance. However, the issue of disagreement is over the question of what exactly is the right thing to do.

Third, the study of moral philosophy can help us to sharpen our general thinking processes. It trains our mind to think logically and reasonably and to handle moral issues with greater clarity. Ethics becomes inevitable as by nature human being is a 'social' being, a being living in relationship with other fellow beings and with the nature around. All actions, whether one is aware of it or not, some way or another affects the others. In order to make a decision/judgement one bases himself on a standard of right and wrong even though the measure may not be the same at all times.

Thus, ethical problems confront everybody. Nobody can really get through life without ethics, even if one may not be aware of the ethical principles. Consciously or unconsciously all of us are every day making moral decisions. Whether we are aware of it or not, the fact is that we do have ethical attitudes and are taking moral stances every day of our lives.

## 1.10 WHY SHOULD WE BE MORAL?

Not few are the people who ask this question: Why should we be moral? Why should we take part in the moral institution of life? Why should we adopt a moral point of view?

In every human person there is a deep desire for good. Human beings by nature tend to be good – *summum bonum*. Each man/woman desires what is best for himself/herself. The ethical principles and moral practices help one to attain what is best. It helps a person to perfect himself/herself as a moral being. Morality has to do more with one's interior self than the practice of some customs or set rules. Viewed from this point, morality is a deep down desire in a human being and is something to do with the very nature of human being. The rational nature of human being makes him/her aware of certain fundamental principles of logical and moral reasoning. This means that there is not only a subjective aspect to every human action but also an objective one that prompts a human person to base himself/herself on certain common principles.

We also find that for the functioning of any society we need certain rules and regulations. The conditions of a satisfactory human life for people living in groups could hardly obtain otherwise (neither a “state of nature” nor a “totalitarian state”). The institutions which are designed to make life easier and better for human being, cannot function without certain moral principles. However, here the question of individual freedom can also come in. How far the society can go on demanding? Should it not respect the freedom of the individual? Is morality made for man or man is made for morality?

Morality is a lot like nutrition. Most of us have never had a course in nutrition or even read much about it. Yet many of us do have some general knowledge of the field, of what we need to eat and what not. However, we also make mistakes about these things. Often thinking of the good a particular diet can do in the long run for our health, we may go for it although it may bring no immediate satisfaction. So too is our moral life. While nutrition focuses on our physical health, morality is concerned about our moral health. It seeks to help us determine what will nourish our moral life and what will poison it. It seeks to enhance our lives, to help us to live better lives. Morality aims to provide us with a common point of view from which we can come to agreement about what all of us ought to do. It tries to discover a more objective standpoint of evaluation than that of purely personal preference.

### Check Your Progress III

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Write a note on the relevance of Ethics.

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## 1.11 LET US SUM UP

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Ethics is the study of human behaviour. It studies human actions and judges them to be right or wrong. As a philosophical discipline, ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live. In ethics we deal only with human actions, those actions done by a human person consciously, deliberately and in view of an end. In human history, the origin of ethics and moral consciousness cannot be easily traced back. It is the result of a long process of rational development and evolution.

Ethics makes use of the methods of induction and deduction. Among the different approaches to the study of ethics, the non-normative ethics (descriptive ethics and metaethics) which examine morality without concern for making judgements as to what is morally right or wrong and normative ethics (general normative ethics and applied ethics) which make judgements as to what is morally right or wrong are the most prominent ones. Although ethics can be regarded as a science it is distinguished from the natural sciences, inasmuch as it has a direct reference to an end that human person desire to attain. Ethics, however, is often said to be the fruit of all the sciences since it ultimately perfects human person, by ordering all other sciences and all things else in respect to an ultimate end that is absolutely free.

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## 1.12 KEY WORDS

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**‘Ethics’ and ‘Morals’:** Ethics is the theory of right and wrong conduct. While ethics involves the values that a person seeks to express in a certain situation, morals refers to the way one sets about achieving this. Ethics is concerned with the principles of human behaviour, morals with the application of these principles, in a particular situation.

**‘Moral’, ‘Immoral’ and ‘Amoral’ Actions:** An action is said to be moral when it is done deliberately to attain the ultimate happiness. A morally good action has to be a moral action and a human action. An action is moral only if it is done freely and in view of an end.

**Immoral :** Immoral means ‘not observing a particular known moral rule’. Immoral actions are all those actions that are morally bad actions (e.g. Incest, homicide, etc.). ‘Amoral’ or ‘non-moral’ means ‘not relevant to, or concerned with, morals’. We can note some of the non-moral actions: actions of inanimate objects or events (flood, famine, etc.). They are indifferent actions and are beyond the moral sphere. Reflex actions: they are automatic and immediate (e.g. breathing). Accidental acts, actions of children below the age of reason/ insane persons and actions done under the spell of hypnosis.

**Habitual actions:** They are moral actions as the habits are formed deliberately or acquired voluntarily. In ethics we are concerned with ‘immoral’ actions but not ‘amoral’ actions.

**Human Act:** A human act is an act done by a human person deliberately, willingly and freely in view of achieving an end. Morality is spoken of human beings and not of animals. An act to be a moral act, it has to be performed by an individual with reason. Every human act is done in view of an end and is done willingly



with full knowledge and full freedom. Ethics deals with human actions, which help or prevent a person from attaining an end.

**End:** End of human action can be different. For a believer, in God the ultimate end could be the eternal happiness of man (God and the beatific vision). God is the highest end of man and God is involved in every action of man. Happiness consists in the knowledge and love of God. For a non believer the well-being of humanity could be the end. It could also be an act done for its own sake.

**Right and Wrong:** Ethics is defined as the science of rightfulness or wrongfulness of conduct. What makes an action right or wrong? The word “right” derives from the Latin “rectus”, meaning ‘straight’ or ‘according to norm’. An action is morally right if it is in conformity with the moral law and morally wrong if it is not in conformity with the moral law.

**Good and Bad:** The word ‘good’ denotes the attitude of mind and will. An action is morally good if it helps one attain the ultimate end and morally bad if it does not fulfill the purpose. The term ‘good’ is also used to signify something which is itself taken as an end. Thus the *summum bonum*, or supreme good, means the supreme end at which we aim.

**Voluntary and Involuntary Actions:** Acts are voluntary if they proceed from an internal principle with knowledge of the purpose of the act. An act is free if it proceeds from a self-determining agent. Are all voluntary acts free? Most of the voluntary acts are free except the highest act by which man embraces his Supreme Good.

If knowledge or free choice is totally lacking, the act is involuntary. An involuntary act may be performed without reference to the purpose of the act. It may be done with knowledge against the choice of the will, as when a man emerging from an aesthetic talks foolishly but is unable to control his words. The former emphasizes the strength of emotion with which one is choosing and the latter emphasizes that the choice is free of emotional stress.

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## 1.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. Ethics in the Western Philosophy developed mainly in Greece. Socrates, the great Greek philosopher, was the first one among the Greeks to awaken his fellow men to the need for rational criticism of their beliefs and practices. Plato, in his famous work *Republic* and in other later dialogues and epistles, constructed a systematic view of nature, God, and man from which he derived his ethical principles. Aristotle, the greatest of all Greek philosophers, contributed significantly to a systematic investigation of the foundations ethics through his ethical writings (i.e. the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the *Politics*).

### Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. Ethics, like any other philosophical discipline, makes use of both the inductive method and deductive method. Deduction is a process of gaining knowledge independently of experience through pure logical reasoning. It draws a particular conclusion from a universal or general truth. For example: All men are mortal, Ram is a man, and therefore, Ram is mortal. Induction, on the other hand, begins with the particular and moves to the universal. For example: Water at Chennai boils at 100°C. Water at Kochi boils at 100°C. Water at Mumbai boils at 100°C. Therefore water boils at 100°C.

2. The whole study of ethics can be divided into General Ethics and Special Ethics. However, considering the different ethical theories, philosophers divide it into three general subject areas: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Metaethics investigates the origin and meaning of ethical concepts. Normative ethics tries to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. Applied ethics involves examining specific controversial issues such as abortion, ecological problems, etc.

### Answers to Check Your Progress III

1. The relevance and need of ethics is felt more than ever in our society today. We can point out at least three reasons why we should study ethics. First, the study of moral philosophy or ethics can deepen our reflection on the ultimate questions of life. It helps a person to look critically at the most important questions concerning our existence here on earth. Second, the study of moral philosophy can help us to think better about morality. It can help us to clarify our moral positions when we make judgments. Third, the study of moral philosophy can help us to sharpen our general thinking processes. It trains our mind to think logically and reasonably and to handle moral issues with greater clarity.



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## UNIT 2 MORAL ACTION\*

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Definition
- 2.3 Religious Views
  - 2.3.1 Hinduism
  - 2.3.2 Jainism
  - 2.3.3 Buddhism
  - 2.3.4 Islam
  - 2.3.5 Christianity
- 2.4 Philosophical Views
  - 2.4.1 Teleological Theories
  - 2.4.2 Deontological Theory
  - 2.4.3 Virtue Ethics
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Key Words
- 2.7 Further Readings and References
- 2.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit presents,

- the meaning of moral actions, and
- explains the philosophical implications of moral actions,
- elucidates the differences between moral and non-moral action/sciences.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Being human entails living together or living amongst others. No one likes living in isolation, as this is witnessed from birth itself. A child longs for her mother when she feels that her mother is not around. This longing of a child for her mother exposes the inexplicable bond human beings indefinitely have among each other in a society, as it is an inevitable part of being human. We cannot deny the fact that we live in a society. Each shares a common place and a common understanding among us. By living in a society, we inculcate some kind of concerns like faith, trust, loyalty, etc. that creates a bond among each one of us. Life is all about acting upon these concerns and for this, we are trained to follow certain moral obligations in some way or the other.

The very aspect of being human is morally obligatory because morality is the basic requirement of our life as human adults. But the way through which one

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can analyze the nature of moral obligation is by clarifying what morality is and how are we to act morally? This question opens up some newer dimensions to approach the related questions like, whether all our actions are considered moral or does an action consist of certain elements for which it is called a moral action. If so, then what could be the elements? Therefore, to understand what a “moral action” means or when are we supposed to call particular actions as moral actions we need to investigate both these terms “action” and “moral” separately. For this, let us first try and analyze what an action means and then further move on to investigate the element of morality underlying an action. Nonetheless, to speak of all human action as having a moral dimension should not be taken to mean that all actions are essentially moral actions for there is something profoundly moral that is not true in all species of action.

An action or an act is a movement done or generated by an agent to produce a result. It does not occur like an event but is generated by the agent of the act because of the motive or the intention the agent has. Every action consists of an agent, a motive or will or intention, and a result. For example, “John’s gave alms to the poor” is an action because it did not simply happen like, “The sun rises every day on the east.” In this above example, the first statement is an action because John’s acted out of an intention or a motivation to help the poor and along with that he had the end in his mind, i.e., to make the poor happy. The second statement is an event that happens every day without any failure because of the calculation of time and rotation of the earth. There is no intention behind the rising of the Sun. Only when someone is directed by an intention, a motive, or a will then it results in action because one actively takes part and strives to accomplish its goal. Many moral philosophers discuss that concept of motive, or will, or intention is a peculiar element of action. Without this element, many other moral concepts would not have been possible like that of moral responsibility, moral ownership, etc. This does not entitle us to consider that all actions are moral, but we also cannot deny that all our actions are evaluative to some or the other extent. The attempt to evaluate our actions results in categorizing it under right, wrong or moral, immoral, and amoral actions. This possibility of evaluating an action as right or wrong is by investigating the intention, or motive, or will of that person.

Moral action is any action that proceeds from our deliberate will, intention, or motive. We need not contrast moral with immoral acts whenever a question is put forth, i.e. When can we call a particular action moral? A moral act must be our own act, i.e., it must spring from our own will. If we act upon the direction of others, then there is no moral content in such acts. From the earliest human history, moral actions and religious actions are inescapably joined. In this case it is difficult to judge the morality of action because we cannot penetrate the depth of his mind. Different philosophers have given different theories in order to explain how action has its moral worth- Deontology, Teleology, and Virtue. This unit will explicate all these theories in order to understand how an action is morally worthy and show the possibilities of immoral or moral actions.

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## 2.2 DEFINITION

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The term moral is derived from the Latin word *mos* that means custom or habit. From this, it can be derived that when an action is performed deliberately we can

judge them good or bad and this can be further clubbed into moral and immoral actions.

By moral action, it means those actions that are within the moral sphere and are thus objects of moral judgments. These actions are distinguished from non-moral actions, those actions that are devoid of moral quality and scope of moral judgment. In a wider sense the word moral means that in which moral quality, (rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness) is present, i.e., what is right or wrong, good or bad. And an action performed means that which is performed by a rational agent, not through blind impulse or inclination but knowledge and free choice of means and end. The instinctive action is not a moral action because instinctive actions are found most explicitly in lower animals. Instinctive actions cannot be called as good or bad, right or wrong as animals cannot discriminate between right and wrong are non-moral. Actions of psychically uninformed, children, actions done under the spell of hypnotic forces, actions are done under compulsion are non-moral. For some philosophers, every human act in itself is not good but one if done with good intention. Immanuel Kant considers that an action is morally worthy only if done out of good will. A good will is likely to be useful, but it is not good because it is useful. Its value would not be affected by an accidental lack of utility. Moral action is not done for the sake of usefulness or to own any kind of merit. Two men may have done the same thing, but the act of one may be moral, and that of the other contrary. Take, for instance, a man who feeds the poor out of great pity and another feeds with the motive of gaining position or with some such selfish end. Though the action is the same, the act of the one is moral and that of the other non-moral. When we use the word “moral” it is being used in connection with moral goodness for indicating that we aim at goodness of character.

It seems that most philosophers regard the motives of a person as factors that make her action morally good or bad. Apparently, some of them think that motives are the only relevant factors for an action’s morality. It is obvious that motives are important for the morality of an action but not necessarily. If a person spends money to help the poor, her motivation tends to make her action morally good, and we recognize her to be a morally good person. But if she spends the money only because she regards it as a lucrative investment, her action may be prudent, but it would not be morally praiseworthy. But motive and intention of an action cannot be distinguished in thought but practice. For instance, if A puts poison into B’s coffee with the intention to kill him, his motive may have been the hope to inherit B’s wealth. Electra intentionally killed an old woman but unintentionally her mother. If she had killed her mother intentionally, we would judge his deplorable action differently. Actions can be morally bad even if motives are good. Suppose that a person A does something because she thinks it will make B happy. She is however aware that her action will harm C and D. Here, A is only concerned about B and is indifferent to C and D. A is, therefore, acting from a good motive (she wishes to make B happy), but what she does is nevertheless not morally good. The reason for this is not her motive but lack of certain other motives. Due to lack of some motives made the action in the above example bad or else it would have been good. This points out to the idea that many actions are morally bad even when their motives are not blameworthy. Take the case of a thief. A boy steals Rs 500 from the purse of a rich woman, but the woman shouts out to the crowd that he

has stolen Rs 2000 from her. On being caught by the boy, he returns the Rs 500 to a woman. The boy says that due to lack of Rs 500 he is unable to consult the doctor because the doctor denies treating her without the payment. In this case, the boy's motive was to cure his mother and release her from pain, but this action is morally bad because he would gain something only by taking away someone else's property. He is not motivated by his knowledge that it harms the rich woman. Morality of an action is not only determined by its intention, but unintentional actions could also be blameworthy. The goodness of an action depends on how a person has been trained throughout life. When, for example, toddlers are taught to avoid hurting others. Later, many children begin to regularly say "please" and "thank you." These do not come pre-programmed but are inculcated through external training.

What sets moral action apart from other species of action? How do we know that the action we perform is a moral one? Essentially, moral action is an action of moral value such that one's moral consciousness comes to work as one is called to make a moral response. Moral action is not a one-time but is an ongoing, continuous process. It can be said that by choosing the good, we become good. By choosing to tell the truth, one becomes honest like the case of the boy who stole Rs 500. However, honesty exhibited once does not make one honest to be such, one has to choose consistently to be honest. It may sound straightforward and formulaic, but actual moral action can be far more complex. Hence, becoming good, as the word "becoming" itself connotes, involves a constant struggle. Every action demands thinking, and decision-making and every moral action calls for rational deliberation and affirmation of our humanity. Moral action touches on one's moral ideals. Our moral ideals pertain to what is believed to constitute a life that is worthy of humans which are a product of generations of shaping via our tradition and which come to the fore as summoned by action. Actions which proceed from natural programming of the body such as instinctive, thoughtless movements, mannerism, and reflex actions are not considered to be properly moral actions as they happen outside the control of the human agent. Likewise, any action is done by an individual out of honest ignorance hardly fits in the criteria of moral action. Moral actions are actions that proceed from the deliberate free will of human beings. Every individual human action that proceeds from deliberate reason must be good or bad. Moral actions are those actions that properly belong to conscious, rational, free human beings. Let us highlight the key elements of moral actions:

- (1) Moral actions are done by an agent with knowledge or consciousness i.e. voluntariness as opposed to actions that are out of ignorance. Knowledge here pertains to knowledge of facts surrounding or characterizing the situation, the choices available and also the possible consequences of the choices. For instance, a person unaware that her friend is allergic to onions serves her an onion cutlet. Had she known about her allergy, she could have served a cutlet with a different filling. Due to ignorance of his friend's medical state cancels out moral responsibility except when such ignorance is totally beyond remedy.
- (2) Moral actions involve freedom.

Moral action is any act done by mostly accepted and deemed good values in any society where the act is being performed. Every society has some values, some ground rules, which determine whether something is good, or bad which is the

result of numerous factors like history, culture, dominant religion, economical conditions, level of education and so on. Also with time values keep changing. The community or society we live in sets the level of morality. This also varies with different cultures and the way people respond depending on nature and other humans.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Write a short note on Moral Action.

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2. How is a moral action different from a non-moral action?

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**2.3 RELIGIOUS VIEWS**

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The religious experience provides a framework within which moral behavior is a part. From the religious point of view, a moral action is one that helps the human being to attain the ultimate end, i.e., the Supreme good, which is God. Consequently, those acts are morally good for a human that brings her nearer to God, the ultimate end of one’s existence. We shall discuss moral action according to religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, and Christianity.

**2.3.1 HINDUISM**

The concept of moral action has been depicted and presented in the most famous scripture- The *Bhagavad Gita*. The summon bonum of *Gita* is realization of God or the consolidation of society (*loksamgraha*). The means for the realization of the ultimate end are following certain duties known as *Varña Ashram*, *Nitya dharma*, and *Naimittika dharma* etc. There are two underlying principles in Hinduism –Dharma, and Karma that explain moral thought and action. The central teaching of *Bhagavad Gita* is *Nishkam Karma*. This, however, does not mean disinterested action as it is interpreted as an action not for the fulfillment of any selfish desire but rather for social welfare or with intention of realization of God. It means that the allocated work done without expectations, motives or thinking about its outcomes will purify one’s mind and gradually makes an individual fit to see the value of reason and the benefits of renouncing the action itself. God controls the results of actions, but in order to become a dynamic instrument of



divine action after understanding this order and complete self-submission to God, it is important to act with determination. True self-realization lies in self-surrender. In Hinduism, *Dharma* is one of the all-encompassing terms; it can mean religion, law, duty, order, morality, justice. *Dharma* fundamentally underlies conceptions of morality in Hinduism. To act out of duty is, in essence, to act appropriately, what is appropriate is determined by the content in which the action is to be performed and who is performing it. *Karma* is intimately associated with *dharma* in this regard. Positive actions produce positive effects; negative actions produce negative effects. To act dharmically is to act in karmically positive manner, when one acts dharmically only then one produces positive karma.

### 2.3.2 JAINISM

Jainism emphasizes on the necessity of self-effort to move the soul towards divine consciousness and liberation. Any soul that has conquered its own inner enemies is prescribed five moral principles to be observed, i.e., *Pancha Vratas- Ahimsa, Satya, Asetya, Brahmacharya, Aparigraha*. The main teaching of Jainism is that every soul is the architect of its own life, here or hereafter. Like Buddhists, Hindus, Jainas believe that good conduct leads to better circumstances in life and bad conduct leads to worse. Jainism maintains that there are triple gems (right view, right knowledge and right conduct) that provide the way to realization of correct action. However, since they conceive Karma to be a material substance that draws the soul back to its body, all actions both good or bad lead to rebirth in the body. No action can help a person achieve liberation from rebirth. For Jainism, the moral life is one which is free from all attachments to worldly things, including attachment to sensual enjoyment. It encourages spiritual development through cultivation of one's own personal wisdom and reliance on self-control.

### 2.3.3 BUDDHISM

For Buddhism, a moral action is one which is devoid of suffering as it places great emphasis on the sanctity of life. The four noble truths of Buddhism are the guiding principles of moral thought and action, particularly as expressed in the Eightfold path. The motivation for following the noble truths is not to be good per se but to facilitate the realization the Buddhists call Enlightenment. The eightfold path is a set of guidelines for acceptable or correct behavior. The initial precept is non-injury or non-violence to all living creatures. The eight items in the eightfold path are often divided into three categories: Right view, Right conduct and Right practice. Within the Right view, there are two items (1) Right understanding and (2) Right thought. In Right conduct, there are (3) Right speech (4) Right action (5) Right livelihood. In Right practice there are (6) Right effort (7) Right Mindfulness (8) Right concentration. This eight fold path originally directs an agent towards the ultimate goal of enlightenment which also is behavioral guidelines. It never asks for blind faith, it never seeks to promote learning a process of self-discovery. For Buddhism, moral action is one, which holds respect, generosity, self-control, honesty, and compassion.

### 2.3.4 ISLAM

Islamic ethical thinking begins from the premise that the most fundamental relationship in the life of human beings is their relationship with God. For Islam, a moral action is one when derived from one of the five categories: the obligatory,

the prohibited, the superogatory, the disfavored, and the indifferent. One of the most important aspects of a Muslim's life is to have high moral standards. The view point of Islam is that the universe is the creation of God and everything is functioning under his command. Unlike the commonly held beliefs that man is evil by nature, Islam hopes that man is born with a morally good nature that responds to faith and ethical values. Over time, it may get corrupted due to temptations and man's inability to exercise control over desires. For human's conduct to be moral as per Islam, there are two conditions which must be fulfilled: one's intention must be good and one's action must be according to what God has instructed. For example, if a wrong deed was done with good intentions that ultimately produced good outcome, it cannot be termed as moral. If the intentions were wrong to begin with and the outcome was accidentally good, there is no question of moral behavior. Good intentions and good deeds must go hand in hand.

### 2.3.5 CHRISTIANITY

For Christianity, life should be a worship of God, which is expressed not only in rituals and prayers but also upon how a Christian lives. In his or her seeking to live a moral life, a Christian tries to obey the rules for his or her behavior that have been decreed by God and recorded in the *Bible*. For Christianity, morality is derived from God and since God is a benevolent one so whatever he commands is morally good. God is the standard that we have a reference. Moral action is performed by sincere confession of one's sin as such confession demonstrates one's acceptance of God's will and love. Actions are morally good because God commands them and what God commands is morally good because it was He commanded it.

#### Check Your Progress II

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer  
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. Write a short note on the Buddhism and Jainism's outlook on moral action.

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## 2.4 PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS

The philosophical views on moral action are explicated through the different moral theories that are structured by different philosophers. This unit attempts to explain how the different moral theorists try to understand what a moral action is? The ultimate concern of a moral theory is to guide in making the decisions and judgments relating to various actions viz. moral or non-moral. Moral theories are broadly classified into three: Teleological theory, Deontological theory and Virtue theory. All these moral theories have presented their moral standards from

different angles. Let us deliberate these theories with their respective principles of actions separately.

### 2.4.1 Teleological Theories

The word teleology is derived from the Greek word *telos* which means goal or purpose. Teleology is the study of goals, ends, and purposes. It locates moral goodness in the consequence of our behavior and not the behavior itself. In other words, an action is morally right or good if the consequence of that action is more favorable than unfavorable. According to the teleological theorists, what is morally right, wrong, or obligatory is what produces good results. Nothing is intrinsically good or bad. Teleological theories are based on reflective desires, i.e., pleasure, happiness and the good of the individual. These reflective desires of the individual are the ends and the actions should be the prime focus of ethical deliberation. The rightness and wrongness of an action are based on the goodness and badness of their consequences. According to teleological moral theory, all rational human actions are teleological in the sense that we reason about the means of achieving certain ends. For instance, the wrongness of telling a lie or intentionally harming someone depends on whether these actions produce good or bad results. A lie, if it prevents suffering might by consequentialists be the right thing to do. Moral behavior is goal-directed so from a teleological point of view, human behavior is neither right nor wrong in itself. However, from the teleological perspective, motives really have nothing to do with rightness or wrongness of the act. What matters is what might happen as a consequence of those actions in any given context. Teleological moral theories must somehow connect the consequences of human behavior to the foundational moral concepts of good and bad, right and wrong, and moral and immoral. The hallmark of most teleological moral theories is that they identify these moral concepts with pleasure and pain or happiness and unhappiness. Hence, moral actions are good, right, or moral in so far as they lead to pleasurable consequences and bad, wrong or immoral if they lead to the painful consequences. There are three types of teleological theories-

**2.4.1.1 Ethical egoism-** For this theory, an action is morally appropriate if the consequence of an action is more favorable than unfavorable only to the moral agent acting. Epicurus, Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Adam Smith are the advocates of this theory.

**2.4.1.2 Ethical Altruism-** an action is morally right if the consequences of an action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone except the moral agent. Ethical altruism inspires an individual to sacrifice personal projects and dedicate themselves for the cause of others so that it will be treated as the most beneficent cause of an action.

**2.4.1.3 Ethical Utilitarianism-** an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone. Classical or Ethical Utilitarianism is one of the main theories brought under the rubric of teleological ethics. This is further broken into two main components- a theory of value and a theory of right action. Firstly, it endorses Hedonism as a theory of value. Hedonism means happiness or pleasure as the supreme end of life. Secondly, it endorses consequentialism as a theory of right action. Jeremy Bentham and J.S Mill are the main exponents of this theory. They developed the position that it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that measures the rightness and wrongness of

an act. Mill formulates the principle of utility that he regards as a fundamental moral principle. By principle of utility he means the principle which approves or disapproves of every action according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or dismiss happiness of the party whose interest is in question.

**Check Your Progress III**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What are the arguments forwarded by teleological theory on moral action?

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**2.4.2 Deontological Theory**

For deontologists a moral action is essentially about following a set of rules that forbid or require certain actions. These rules specify actions that are right or wrong about the rule in the question. The word deontology is derived from the Greek word *deon* and *logos* which means duty and study, so deontology is the study of duty. Deontological theorists hold that moral goodness has nothing to do with generating pleasure, happiness, and consequences. The wrongness of an action is intrinsic or resides in the kind of action that is rather than the consequences it brings about. Deontologists equate right or wrong actions with obedience or disobedience to moral laws. They consider rightness or wrongness as intrinsic to certain types of actions. They tend to identify the rightness and wrongness of an action with fixed principles of conduct. It judges the morality of an action upon the intrinsic value of the act. For deontologists what makes a choice right is its conformity with the moral norm. Such moral norms are to be obeyed by each moral agent. In this sense, for such deontologists, the right is said to have priority over the good. Certain actions ought to be right even if they do not produce good consequences for the rightness of such actions consists of certain norms. Deontological theories are by definition duty-based. That is to say that morality consists in the fulfillment of moral obligations and duties. Duties are further associated with obeying absolute moral rules. Human beings are morally required to do certain acts to uphold a rule or law. The rightness or wrongness of moral rule is determined independently of its consequences or happiness.

Immanuel Kant’s theory is perhaps the most well-known example of the deontological approach. For Kant, an action can have moral worth if and only if it is done from duty. His notion of acting from duty is in standard manner understood as doing what is right through the moral law. Whether a course of action is morally permissible will depend on whether or not it conforms to moral law i.e. Categorical Imperative. Categorical imperatives are the unconditional commands. It has three different formulations:

- (1) The first formulation- Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

- (2) The second formulation- Act as to treat humanity, both in your person and in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never simply as a means.
- (3) The third formulation-Every rational being must so act as if he were through this maxim, always legislating members in the universal kingdom of ends.

Our duties are to be understood regarding respecting this imperative. Kant considered that the imperative should not be hypothetical, as it cannot be derived from the consideration of any end outside of the will of the individual. The categorical imperative has no reference to the external ends but in the right direction of the will itself. Human beings must have access to the moral truth to be responsible agents at all. Throughout the *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that a moral action is one that is for the sake of the moral law. There is no particular content in the moral law so it cannot tell us what the matter or content of our actions ought to be but can only instruct us. For instance, we are obliged to keep our promises even when keeping them results in less good. Kant believed that morality was *apriori* and investigating moral we need to look at pure practical reason. For him, the reason is what makes us capable of morality, to begin with. No conduct is regarded can be regarded as truly virtuous which rests on feeling but reason. Kantian morality commands that we take the right attitude in action, not just the performance of the right act. An act is morally good for him if it proceeds from a subjective principle or maxim that is fit to be a universal law. Kant, unlike Mill, believed that certain types of actions (murder, theft, and lying) were prohibited even if it brings more happiness than the alternative.

#### Check Your Progress IV

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer  
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What is a moral action, according to Immanuel Kant?

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### 2.4.3 Virtue Ethics

For Virtue ethicists, an action is moral or virtuous if it is performed through practical deliberation and not out of ignorance. Morality stems from the identity or character of the individual rather than being a reflection of the action of the individual. Aristotle has been the main source of inspiration of virtue ethics. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he urged that the best life of a human is *eudemonia* that occupies the exercise of virtues or excellences. He says that there is nothing

about having a life except the exercise of virtues. This is a concept fostered by Stoics also. Virtue ethics describes the character of a moral agent as a driving force for the ethical behavior rather than rules those set by Kant. Virtue is the primary mode of evaluation as opposed to the act evaluates such as right and wrong. Virtue is the habit or quality that allows the bearer to succeed at his or her or its purpose. The virtue of a knife, for example, is the sharpness and that of a racehorse is speed. Thus, to identify the virtues for human beings, one must have an account of what human purpose is. According to Aristotle, virtue is seen as a quality that leads to *eudemonia* or well-being. He categorized virtue as moral and intellectual.

A virtue ethicist would, however, focus less on lying in any particular instance and instead consider one's character and moral behavior, the decision to tell a lie or not to tell a lie. It refers to the collection of normative acts that emphasize being rather than doing. A virtue ethicists philosopher will identify virtues, desirable characteristics that the moral or virtuous person embodies. Possessing these virtues is what makes one moral and one's actions are a mere reflection of one's inner morality. An action cannot be used as a demarcation of morality because a virtue encompasses more than just a simple selection of action. Instead, it is about the way of being that would cause the person exhibiting the virtue to make a certain virtuous choice consistently in each situation. The agent chooses virtue and chooses to perform the virtuous action but choosing virtuous act the agent in choosing exhibits practical wisdom, knowledge of what he is doing and why it is good. This entails that the virtuous agent cannot act out of ignorance. Otherwise, he would not be genuinely choosing and would not be exhibiting practical wisdom. Take for instance that there are two individuals Karb and Barb- Karb is a naturally good person who enjoys helping others-she isn't too bright, but her nature is such that she ends up helping people simply out of the kindness of heart. This kindness on his part is not cultivated; it is just a part of her personality, her basic nature. Barb, on the other hand, is also a kind of person but someone who has worked at it by developing good habits. She is good because she chose to be; she rationally and effectively endorsed virtue and set out on a path to be virtuous. She might have been helped along by having good parents who instilled good values, but still, the choice was hers to make when she grew up. She was able to rationally reflect on her character and make decisions about what to endorse. In Aristotle's view, Karb is someone who has natural goodness but no true virtue. Barb, on the other hand, has a genuine virtue because she has chosen virtue: she displayed practical wisdom. Karb has not and so her goodness in a way is accidental because it is operating by a kind of mindless instinct. For Aristotle, a virtuous person is a person who functions harmoniously- his desires and emotions do not conflict with what he knows to be right.

David Hume also wrote on virtue ethics. He views virtues as mental qualities as pleasing: they are pleased because they are conducive to the social utility in some respect. Thus, he places no heavy psychological requirements on virtue. Having virtue means that one has a pleasing quality. The virtuous person does not need to have wisdom or intelligence, though they would count as intellectual virtues because they are pleasing and useful qualities. Hume's account does depend on a certain view of human nature. We are the sorts of creatures moved by feelings of sympathy for others, as well as concern for ourselves. He believed that people are motivated by self-interest but that they are also motivated by love and sympathy

for others. This sympathy forms the basis for morality. The pain of another is bad, and when I see this, I react sympathetically to the person. For instance, I would probably feel pity for a person if I see him being tortured. He said that when we make moral evaluations what we are most concerned about are the motives. The primary focus of moral evaluation is the internal states, the agent associated with virtue or having good character traits.

### Check Your Progress V

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What is the primary focus of moral evaluation, according to David Hume?

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## 2.5 LET US SUM UP

Morality is, therefore, an institution of human life under which questions such as, ‘which conduct is right and which one is wrong?’, ‘which character is good and which one is bad?’ are raised and answered. However, Morality is synonymous with moral goodness or moral rightness. To say that some act is moral is not to say in this sense that it may be judged either as right or wrong, But to say that it is right. The essence of morality consists in promoting the welfare of others, or in practicing non-violence or control of senses, etc. Being moral does not simply mean being right or being of a good conduct and character but also being a moral agent whose action or actions may be judged either right or wrong .The concept of moral action is different according to both religious and philosophical views as described above. Many thinkers have explained the content of morality in an action through different formulations. Their formulations have been represented in form of theories like, Deontology, Teleology and Virtue ethics.

## 2.6 KEY WORDS

**Morality :** Morality is a set of customs and habits that shape how we think about how we should live or about what is a good human life.

**Action :** It is a deliberative movement performed by a human agent.

**Intention :** it is more than a mere wish, a conspicuous change that we aim to bring.

## 2.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERNCES

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## 2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to check your progress I

1. Moral action is an action that is acted through one's will or intention to accomplish one's deliberative goals. An act is a moral one when acted through one's reasoning capability. Considering that, human beings are rational agents so their actions are always evaluative since not every human action can be moral. Therefore, all human actions are evaluated as either morally good or bad and right or wrong. When the word "moral action" is used, it is presented in connection with moral goodness for indicating that we aim at goodness of the character.

Two elements explain the nature of a moral action. They are- Knowledge or Voluntariness and Freedom.

2. A moral action is an action of moral value such that one's moral consciousness comes to work to make a moral response. A non-moral action is one that is devoid of moral quality and scope of moral judgment. Immoral action is one that is the violation of the accepted principles of right and wrong of a given society.

### Answers to check your progress II

1. The Buddhists and the Jaina outlook on the question of moral action seem more or less similar. The eight-fold path and the triple gems are set of guidelines for acceptable or correct behavior. Actions are good or bad not in terms of the external consequences they produce, but the inner motive that prompts them. For them, the only consequence does not determine the rightness or wrongness of action.

### Answers to check your progress III

1. According to teleological theory, what is morally right, wrong, or obligatory is what produces good results. Nothing is intrinsically good or bad. Moral behavior is goal-directed so from a teleological point of view, human behavior is neither right nor wrong in itself. However, from the teleological perspective, motives really have nothing to do with rightness or wrongness of the act. There are three different teleological theories; Ethical egoism, Ethical altruism, and Ethical Utilitarianism.



**Answers to check your progress IV**

1. Immanuel Kant holds that moral goodness has nothing to do with generating pleasure, happiness, and consequences. The wrongness of an action is intrinsic or resides in the kind of action that is rather than the consequences it brings about. For Kant, an action can have moral worth if and only if it is done from duty. His notion of acting from duty is in standard manner understood as doing what is right through the moral law. Whether a course of action is morally permissible will depend on whether or not it conforms to moral law i.e. Categorical Imperative.

**Answers to check your progress V**

1. According to David Hume, the primary focus of moral evaluation is the internal states, the agent associated with virtue or having good character traits. He believed that the basis of morality is that people are motivated by self-interest but that they are also motivated by love and sympathy for others.



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## UNIT 3 VIRTUES AND VICES\*

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Meaning of Virtue
- 3.3 Socrates: Virtue is Knowledge
- 3.4 Plato's Four Cardinal Virtues
- 3.5 Aristotle's Conception of Virtue
- 3.6 Virtues in Hinduism
- 3.7 Virtues in Islam
- 3.8 Vices
  - 3.8.1 The Christian Vices
- 3.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.10 Key Words
- 3.11 Further Readings and References
- 3.12 Answers to Check your Progress

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit we are going to study Virtues and Vices from an ethical point of view. After understanding the meaning of virtue, we make an effort to grasp the Socratic, Platonic and the Aristotelian conception of virtue. Then we shall attempt to see virtues in Hinduism and Islam. By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- grasp the meaning of virtue
- understand the virtues according to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle the three main Greek Philosophers
- appreciate the virtues in Hinduism and Islam

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Individuals and as groups, human beings search for happiness. The means to attain this goal was discovered by the Greeks to be in the cultivation of virtue. In Indian philosophies also there are qualities contributing to human well-being; however, quite often instead of focusing on human happiness as such, Indian concepts of virtue are intertwined with the concept of salvation and afterlife. Something similar happened in Western thought after Greek philosophy met the Christian Revelation. In the present unit however we shall not be dealing specifically with the religious and theological links but only with those elements that fall under the general purview and more or less universal survey of human reason.

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\*Dr. Wilfred D'Souza, Pushpashrama College, Mysore.

## 3.2 MEANING OF VIRTUE

The Greek term for virtue is *arête* which was used for excellence of any kind. But generally the excellence referred to is an excellence belonging to a human being so that the virtues may be described as the forms of human excellence. ‘Virtue’ which comes from the Latin *virtus* means moral excellence. A virtue is a character trait or quality valued as being good. Personal virtues are characteristics valued as promoting individual and collective well-being, and thus good by definition. The opposite of virtue is vice. In ethics, ‘virtue’ is used with two somewhat different meanings. (a) A virtue is a quality of character – a disposition to do what is right in a particular direction, or to perform one of the more universal duties. (b) A virtue is also a habit of action corresponding to the quality of character or disposition. We may refer to the honesty of a human person, or to the honesty of his dealings equally as virtues.

Virtues can be placed into a broader context of values. Each individual has a core of underlying values that contribute to our system of beliefs, ideas and/or opinions. Integrity in the application of a value ensures its continuity and this continuity separates a value from beliefs, opinion and ideas. In this context a value (e.g., Truth or Equality or Creed) is the core from which we operate or react. Societies have values that are shared among many of the participants in that culture. An individual’s values typically are largely, but not entirely, in agreement with their culture’s values. Individual virtues can be grouped into one of four categories of values: Ethics (virtue - vice, good - bad, moral - immoral - amoral, right - wrong, permissible - impermissible) Aesthetics (beautiful, ugly, unbalanced, pleasing) Doctrinal (political, ideological, religious or social beliefs and values) Innate/Inborn (inborn values such as reproduction and survival).

Laird has divided virtues into three classes:

- (a) There are virtues of what he calls, ‘the righteous quality’. A virtue of this kind consists in the habit of performing a duty of a particular kind and in the quality of character which leads to this kind of action. The only distinction that can be made between virtuous conduct of this kind and right conduct is that the term ‘virtuous conduct’ emphasizes the habitual performance of what is right.
- (b) There are virtues of the ‘requisite quality’. These are necessary to a virtuous character, but are also found in bad characters, and indeed may tend to increase the wickedness of the bad. Such virtues include prudence and perseverance. The villain who is persevering in his villainy is a worse man than the villain who is hesitant.
- (c) There are virtues of the ‘generous quality’. These are chiefly of an emotional kind and they add something not strictly definable, but of the nature of beauty or of moral intrinsic value, to actions that are in other respects right. They sometimes even give a strange quality of nobility to conduct that is morally wrong. We find this in the adventurous courage sometimes attributed to a brigand chief and in the loyalty of often shown to people utterly unworthy of that loyalty. Virtues of this kind seem to have some intrinsic value; this at least is suggested by the value that we assign to these virtues in the characters of people where no good result follows from the presence of the virtue in their actions.

Of the three classes, virtues of the ‘righteous quality’ are the most important in the moral life. Virtues of the ‘requisite quality’ are clearly subordinate to the virtues of the ‘righteous quality’, for they are of value only when they accompany such virtues. Virtues of the ‘generous quality’ depend more on the natural endowments than the other two classes do, and are hardly to be acquired merely by the conscientious doing of one’s duty. Virtues of this quality have an appeal that is perhaps more aesthetic than moral, but they do give to goodness a colour and an adventurous atmosphere which are sometimes sadly lacking in those whose virtues are merely of the righteous quality.

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### 3.3 SOCRATES: VIRTUE IS KNOWLEDGE

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The core of Socrates’ ethics is the concept of virtue. Virtue, according to Socrates, is the deepest and most basic property of man. This virtue is *knowledge*. If on the other hand knowledge embraces everything that is good, we shall be right to suspect that virtue is knowledge.” If virtue is knowledge it can be known and consequently taught. This is the meaning of the imperative ‘know yourself’. ‘Know yourself’ means bring your inner self to light. Through knowledge humans gain possession of oneself whereby one becomes one’s own master.

According to Socrates virtue is the highest aim and greatest good one has to seek in life. He also insisted that if it is to be the highest aim and the greatest good it must have universal consistency and be the same for all. Now, what is universally consistent and the same for all is knowledge which is obtained through concept by the use of reason common in all. *The relation between virtue and knowledge is inseparable. For, Socrates thinks that health, wealth, beauty, courage, temperance etc., which are customarily considered to be various forms of good, are good only if they are guided by wisdom; if guided by folly they could be considered forms of evil.*

Ethics, according to Socrates, has yet another dimension. It does not stop at mere acquisition of the knowledge of the ideas of good. The knowledge of the idea of the good aims at controlling all other ideas and ultimately guides the whole man, including his will and feeling, and necessarily leads him to good actions. Hence ethical knowledge tends to culture the soul which ultimately leads the soul towards regaining its pure, pristine glory. For Socrates this is the reason for believing that “no one does wrong knowingly” and “that knowledge is virtue.”

Socrates says that virtue or goodness is one, although practices differently in different forms of good. In Plato’s *Protagoras* Socrates says that although wisdom, temperance, courage, justice and holiness are the principal forms of virtue, there is one single reality which underlies them all. Yet on another occasion, in Plato’s *Meno*, we find Socrates looking for one virtue which permeates all other virtues.

Socrates explained this by means of an example of a healthy body. According to him all kinds of bodily excellence follow from one single health of the body, similarly, all kinds of virtue follow from the health of the soul. What is meant by the health of the soul? The soul has different functions. The health of the soul follows from orderly arrangement of these different functions. In Plato’s *Gorgias*, we see Socrates saying that the functions of the soul are reasoning, temper, and desire. The function of reasoning aims at attaining wisdom, temper means courage, and desire is soberness. The health of the souls depends on the organized relation

that these functions hold to each other. An orderly arrangement of these functions is something like the following. Wisdom commands and temper assists in the execution of these commands, while desire furnishes the material basis for the actualization of these commands. The aim of the oneness or unity of virtue is the ultimate happiness of the individual. “A successful functioning of the harmonious activities under the regulation of reason yields happiness.” Thus the Socratic notion of virtue as one means is “the self of a good man is an organic unity of all its functions.”

The Socratic notion of virtue as one leads us finally to conclude that there is one Idea of the Good which underlies all the ethical activities of man which are intrinsically good. Socrates speaks in the *Republic* of Plato that in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this.

**Check your progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the meaning of virtue?

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2. Explain the Socratic dictum “Virtue is Knowledge”.

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### 3.4 PLATO’S FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

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The four virtues which Plato described in the *Republic* were later called the *cardinal* virtues. The word ‘cardinal’ is a derivative of the Latin word ‘cardo’, meaning a hinge, and the cardinal virtues are the virtues by which the moral life is supported as a door is supported by its hinges.

Plato describes the four cardinal virtues in *The Republic*:

*Wisdom* (calculative) - see the whole

*Courage* (spirited) - preserve the whole

<i>Moderation</i> (appetitive)	- serve the whole
<i>Justice</i> (founding/ preserving virtue)	- “mind your own business” i.e. “tend to your soul”/”know yourself”

Plato defines how an individual can attain these virtues: *Wisdom* comes from exercising reason; *courage* from exercising emotions or spirit; *moderation* (sometimes “temperance”) from allowing reason to overrule desires; and from these *justice* ensues, a state in which all elements of the mind are in concord with one another. Justice is described by Plato to be the founding and preserving virtue because only once someone understands justice, can he or she gain the other three virtues, and once someone possesses all four virtues, it is justice that keeps it all together.

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### 3.5 ARISTOTLE’S CONCEPTION OF VIRTUE

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Aristotle said that the moral end is ‘eudaimonia’, which may be translated as happiness, and he said that ‘eudaimonia’ consisted in the exercise of a person’s soul in accordance with virtue. To put it in Aristotle’s own terminology, ‘eudaimonia’ is the *end* or what was later called the final cause of the moral life, while virtue is what was later called the *form* or the *formal cause* of the moral life. The *form* is analogous to the conception of his picture in the mind of an artist which guides and limits one’s activity as one works, and which gives shape to one’s creation. Aristotle defined virtue as a habit of choice, the characteristic of which lies in the observation of the mean or of moderation, as it is determined by reason or as the practically prudent person would determine it.

Aristotle regarded virtue as primarily a habit of action, and so it was with him only secondarily a quality of character. Virtue is not a mere habit, but a habit of choice. Aristotle defined choice as the deliberate desire of things in our power after consideration of them by the intellect. Choice accordingly is in some sense free for it deals with things in our own power, and it is when such a deliberate choice is repeated that it becomes the habit of action which we call a virtue. The choice, for example, of doing what is right in the face of pain becomes, when habitual, the virtue of courage. The mere doing of single good actions may be accidental or merely impulsive; it is the habitual choice that counts as virtue.

The point in Aristotle’s definition which has been most discussed is his notion of the mean or middle course. A virtue is regarded as if it were a middle position between two vices; courage for example, is the middle position between rashness and cowardice, and liberality is the middle position between extravagance and miserliness. The place of the mean relative to the vices at the extremes depends on the circumstances of each individual. A soldier’s courage should be nearer to rashness than that of a statesman, for it is his business to take risks which would be criminal on the part of a statesman to take. This conception is obviously in agreement with the Greek emphasis on proportion and harmony in art, as expressed in the maxim ‘Nothing too much’ or virtue lies in the middle.

**Check your progress II**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Explain the four Cardinal virtues according to Plato.

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2. Explain Aristotle's conception of virtue.

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### 3.6 VIRTUES IN HINDUISM

Hinduism, or has pivotal virtues that everyone keeping the Dharma is asked to follow. For they are distinct qualities of *manuṣya* (humankind), that allow one to be in the mode of goodness. There are three modes of material nature (*guna*), as described in the Vedas and other Indian Scriptures (e.g. *sāṃkhyakārikā*, *carakasamhitā*): *Sattva* (goodness, creation, stillness, intelligence), *Rajas* (passion, maintenance, energy, activity), and *Tamas* (ignorance, restraint, inertia, destruction). Every person harbours a mixture of these modes in varying degrees. A person in the mode of *Sattva* has that mode in prominence in one's nature, which one obtains by following the virtues of *Dharma*.

The modes of *Sattva* are the following: **Altruism:** Selfless Service to all humanity; **Restraint and Moderation:** This is having restraint and moderation in all things. Sexual relations, eating, and other pleasurable activities should be kept in moderation. It depends on the sect and belief system, some people believe this means celibacy. While others believe in walking the golden path of moderation, i.e. not too far to the side of forceful control and total abandon of human pleasures, but also not too far to the side of total indulgence and total abandonment for moderation. **Honesty:** One is required to be honest with oneself, honest to the family, friends, and all of humanity. **Cleanliness:** Outer cleanliness is to be cultivated for good health and hygiene; inner cleanliness is cultivated through devotion to god, selflessness, non-violence and all the other virtues; which is maintained by refraining from intoxicants. Protection and reverence for the Earth. **Universality:** Showing tolerance and respect for everyone, everything and the way of the Universe. **Peace:** One must cultivate a peaceful manner in order to benefit oneself and those around him. Non-

Violence/Ahimsa: This means not killing, or not being violent in any way to any life form or sentient being. This is why those who practice this Dharma are vegetarians because they see the slaughter of animals for the purpose of food as violent, when there are less violent ways to maintain a healthy diet. Reverence for elders and teachers: This virtue is very important to learn respect and reverence for those who have wisdom and those who selflessly teach in love. The Guru or spiritual teacher is one of the highest principals in many Vedic based spiritualities, and is likened to that of God.

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### 3.7 VIRTUES IN ISLAM

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In the Muslim tradition the *Qur'an* is, as the word of God, the great repository of all virtue in earthly form, and the Prophet, particularly via his *hadiths* or reported sayings, the exemplar of virtue in human form. The very name of Islam, meaning “acceptance,” proclaims the virtue of submission to the will of God, the acceptance of the way things are. Foremost among God’s attributes are mercy and compassion or, in the canonical language of Arabic, *Rahman* and *Rahim*. Each of the 114 chapters of the *Qur'an*, with one exception, begins with the verse, “In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful”. The Arabic word for compassion is *rahmah*. As a cultural influence, its roots abound in the *Qur'an*. A good Muslim is to commence each day, each prayer and each significant action by invoking God the Merciful and Compassionate, i.e. by reciting *Bi Ism-i-Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim*. The Muslim scriptures urge compassion towards captives as well as to widows, orphans and the poor. Traditionally, *Zakat*, a toll tax to help the poor and needy, is obligatory upon all Muslims (9:60). One of the practical purposes of fasting or *sawm* during the month of Ramadan is to help one empathize with the hunger pangs of those less fortunate, to enhance sensitivity to the suffering of others and develop compassion for the poor and destitute.

The Muslim virtues are: prayer, repentance, honesty, loyalty, sincerity, frugality, prudence, moderation, self-restraint, discipline, perseverance, patience, hope, dignity, courage, justice, tolerance, wisdom, good speech, respect, purity, courtesy, kindness, gratitude, generosity, contentment, etc.

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### 3.8 VICIES

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Vice is a practice or a habit considered immoral, depraved, and/or degrading in the associated society. In more minor usage, vice can refer to a fault, a defect, an infirmity or merely a bad habit. Synonyms for vice include fault, depravity, sin, iniquity, wickedness and corruption. The modern English term that best captures its original meaning is the word *vicious*, which means “full of vice”. In this sense, the word *vice* comes from the Latin word *vitium*, meaning “failing or defect”. Vice is the opposite of virtue.

The term *vice* is also popularly applied to various activities considered immoral by some: a list of these might include the abuse of alcohol and other recreational drugs, gambling, smoking, recklessness, cheating, lying and selfishness. Behaviors or attitudes going against the established virtues of the culture may also be called vices: for instance, effeminacy is considered a vice in a culture espousing masculinity as an essential element of the character of males.



### 3.8.1 The Christian Vices

Christians believe that there are two kinds of vice: those which originate with the physical organism as perverse instincts (such as lust), and those which originate with false idolatry in the spiritual realm. The first kind of vice, although sinful, is believed to be less serious than the second. Some vices recognized as spiritual by Christians are blasphemy (holiness betrayed), apostasy (faith betrayed), despair (hope betrayed), hatred (love betrayed) and indifference (scripturally, a “hardened heart”). Christian theologians have reasoned that the most destructive vice equates to a certain type of pride or the complete idolatry of the self. It is argued that through this vice, which is essentially competitive, all the worst evils come into being. In Judeo-Christian creeds it originally led to the *Fall of Man*, and as a purely diabolical spiritual vice, it outweighs anything else often condemned by the Church.

The Roman Catholic Church distinguishes between vice, which is a habit inclining one to sin. Note that in Roman Catholicism, the word “sin” also refers to the state which befalls one upon committing a morally wrong act; in this section, the word will always mean the sinful act. It is the sin, and not the vice, which deprives one of God’s sanctifying grace. Thomas Aquinas taught that “absolutely speaking, the sin surpasses the vice in wickedness”. On the other hand, even after a person’s sins have been forgiven, the underlying habit (the vice) may remain. Just as vice was created in the first place by repeatedly yielding to the temptation to sin, so vice may be removed only by repeatedly resisting temptation and performing virtuous acts; the more entrenched the vice, the more time and effort needed to remove it. Saint Thomas Aquinas says that following rehabilitation and the acquisition of virtues, the vice does not persist as a habit, but rather as a mere disposition, and one that is in the process of being eliminated.

Dante’s seven deadly vices are: Pride or vanity — an excessive love of the self (holding the self outside of its proper position regarding God or fellows; Dante’s definition was “love of self perverted to hatred and contempt for one’s neighbor”). In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, pride is referred to as *superbia*. Avarice (covetousness, greed) — a desire to possess more than one has need or use for (or according to Dante, “excessive love of money and power”). In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, avarice is referred to as *avaritia*. Lust — excessive sexual desire. Dante’s criterion was that “lust detracts from true love”. In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, lust is referred to as *luxuria*. Wrath or anger — feelings of hatred, revenge or denial, as well as punitive desires outside of justice (Dante’s description was “love of justice perverted to revenge and spite”). In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, wrath is referred to as *ira*. Gluttony — overindulgence in food, drink or intoxicants, or misplaced desire of food as a pleasure for its sensuality (“excessive love of pleasure” was Dante’s rendering). In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, gluttony is referred to as *gula*. Envy or jealousy - resentment of others for their possessions (Dante: “love of one’s own good perverted to a desire to deprive other men of theirs”). In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, envy is referred to as *invidia*. Sloth or laziness - idleness and wastefulness of time and/or other allotted resources. Laziness is condemned because it results in others having to work harder; also, useful work will not be done. Sloth is referred to in Latin as *accidie* or *acedia*.

**Check your progress III**

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. List the Hindu and Islamic Virtues.

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2. What is vice? Which are the seven deadly vices?

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**3.9 LET US SUM UP**

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‘Virtue’ which comes from the Latin *virtus* means moral excellence. A virtue is a character trait or quality valued as being good. Personal virtues are characteristics valued as promoting individual and collective well-being, and thus good by definition. The opposite of virtue is vice. While for Socrates knowledge is virtue, for Aristotle virtue lies in the middle; and Plato speaks of the four cardinal virtues on which rest all the moral virtues. Every religion advocates a virtuous life and shuns vices. We have seen how Hinduism and Islam stress on various moral virtues and point a way to salvation. On the other hand, by looking at the vices and the seven deadly sins we have understood the way Christianity advocates a virtuous life. Hence the message of all the three religions: Live virtuously and avoid all the vices.

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**3.10 KEY WORDS**

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**Arete :** Greek term for excellence of any kind.

**Virtue :** Latin term for moral excellence.

**Vitium :** Latin term for vice, meaning defect.

**Cardinal :** comes from the Latin ‘cardo’ meaning hinge. So cardinal means the main virtue on which others are hinged.

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**3.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES**

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## 3.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check your progress I

1. The Greek term for virtue is *arête* which was used for excellence of any kind. But generally the excellence referred to is an excellence belonging to human being so that the virtues may be described as the forms of human excellence. 'Virtue' which comes from the Latin *virtus* means moral excellence. A virtue is a character trait or quality valued as being good.

Personal virtues are characteristics valued as promoting individual and collective well-being, and thus good by definition. The opposite of virtue is vice. In ethics, 'virtue' is used with two somewhat different meanings. (a) A virtue is a quality of character – a disposition to do what is right in a particular direction, or to perform one of the more universal duties. (b) A virtue is also a habit of action corresponding to the quality of character or disposition. We may refer to the honesty of a human person, or to the honesty of his dealings equally as virtues.

2. Virtue, according to Socrates, is the deepest and most basic propensity of humans. This virtue is *knowledge*. If virtue is knowledge it can be known and consequently taught. This is the meaning of the imperative "know thyself." Know yourself means bring your inner self to light. Through knowledge man gains possession of himself whereby he becomes his own master. According to Socrates virtue is the highest aim and greatest good one has to seek in life. He also insisted that if it is to be the highest aim and the greatest good it must have universal consistency and be the same for all. Now, what is universally consistent and the same for all is knowledge which is obtained through concept by the use of reason which is common in all. The relation between virtue and knowledge is inseparable. For, Socrates thinks that health, wealth, beauty, courage, temperance etc., which are customarily considered to be various forms of good, are good only if they are guided by wisdom; if guided by folly they could be considered forms of evil.

### Answers to Check your progress II

1. Plato describes the four cardinal virtues in *The Republic*. They are: wisdom, courage, moderation, justice. Plato defines how an individual can attain these virtues: Wisdom comes from exercising reason; Courage from exercising emotions or spirit; Moderation (sometimes "temperance") from allowing reason to overrule desires; and from these Justice ensues, a state in which all elements of the mind are in concord with one another. Justice is described by Plato to be the founding and preserving virtue because only when someone understands justice can he or she gain the other three virtues, and once someone possesses all four virtues it is justice that keeps it all together.

2. Aristotle defined virtue as a habit of choice, the characteristic of which lies in the observation of the mean or of moderation, as it is determined by reason or as the practically prudent man would determine it. Aristotle regarded virtue as primarily a habit of action, and so it was with him only secondarily a quality of character. Virtue is not a mere habit, but a habit of choice. The point in Aristotle's definition which has been most discussed is his notion of the mean or middle course. A virtue is regarded as if it were a middle position between two vices; courage for example, is the middle position between rashness and cowardice, and liberality is the middle position between extravagance and miserliness. The place of the mean relative to the vices at the extremes depends on the circumstances of each individual. A soldier's courage should be nearer to rashness than that of a statesman, for it is his business to take risks which it would be criminal on the part of a statesman to take. This conception is obviously in agreement with the Greek emphasis on proportion and harmony in art, as expressed in the maxim 'Nothing too much' or virtue lies in the middle.

### Answers to Check your progress III

1. The Hindu virtues are: altruism- selfless Service to all humanity, restraint and moderation, honesty, cleanliness, protection and reverence for the earth, universality, peace, non- violence/ahimsa, reverence and respect for elders and teachers. The Muslim virtues are: mercy, compassion, prayer, repentance, honesty, loyalty, sincerity, frugality, prudence, moderation, self- restraint, discipline, perseverance, patience, hope, dignity, courage, justice, tolerance, wisdom, good speech, respect, purity, courtesy, kindness, gratitude, generosity, contentment, etc.
2. Vice is a practice or a habit considered immoral, depraved, and/or degrading in the associated society. In more minor usage, vice can refer to a fault, a defect, an infirmity or merely a bad habit. Synonyms for vice include fault, depravity, sin, iniquity, wickedness and corruption. The modern English term that best captures its original meaning is the word *vicious*, which means "full of vice". In this sense, the word *vice* comes from the Latin word *vitium*, meaning "failing or defect". Vice is the opposite of virtue. The seven deadly vices are: pride or vanity, avarice, lust, wrath or anger, gluttony, envy or jealousy and sloth or laziness.

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## UNIT 4 MORAL LAW\*

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Defining (Natural) Moral Law
- 4.3 Reason and Morality
- 4.4 Universality and (Natural) Moral Law
- 4.5 Natural Moral Law and Change
- 4.6 Natural Moral Law and Human Dignity
- 4.7 Natural Moral Law and the Concept of Intrinsic Evil
- 4.8 Criticism of Natural Moral Law
- 4.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.10 Key Words
- 4.11 Further Readings and References
- 4.12 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objectives of the Unit are as follows:

- To understand the phenomenon of morality;
- To define natural moral law and understand its nature, i.e. its universality and particularity; change of natural law, the relation of moral law to particular laws; its relation to human dignity; to the concept of intrinsic evil, and
- To understand and respond to the criticism of (Natural) Moral law.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Knowledge of moral law is as widespread as humankind itself. So also is its critique. We can take the concept of *Rta* (found in *Rgveda*) of Indian Philosophy as an example of natural moral law. The task here is to reflect on natural moral law. The phrase 'moral law' is most commonly ascribed to, and usually used in the context of, Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. Our Ethics course has a separate unit on Kant's moral philosophy, so in this present unit our focus will be on natural moral law. In this unit the phrase 'moral law' should be taken to signify what is understood by 'natural moral law' unless specified otherwise. Firstly, we will undertake a brief description of the concept of natural moral law. Then some of the basic criticisms of natural moral law will be enumerated. Finally we will try to address some of these criticisms.

In the light of natural reason humans distinguish between good and bad. According to theoretical reason, wonder over the very existence of things is the beginning

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of all knowledge. The “prescribing character” or the “ought” character of the good is the primordial ethical phenomenon and ethics begins from that primordial phenomenon, and practical reason has also its origin here. The difference between good and bad is in the nature of the good. The good urges the human subject towards that which ought to be, and the bad pulls in the opposite direction. The good makes a claim on the human, and the one who has understood this has understood the contradiction between good and bad.

*Ratio boni* (the reason of the good or the call of good) is that all humans desire the good. All desire the good precisely because the good manifests itself as desirable. Whoever understands the *ratio boni* also understands the ‘ought’ character of the good. He or she also understands simultaneously the highest norm of morality, namely good is to be done and evil to be avoided. The supreme norm of (natural) moral law: do good and avoid evil, is born from or based on the ought character of the good.

Good is to be done and evil is to be avoided. The power of the good to lead to the good manifests itself in the judgement of practical reason urging humans to realize the good. The validity (*Gültigkeit*) of all the norms of practical reason rests on the primordial insight (*Ureinsicht*) into the meaning (*Sinn*) of the good. This is open to all humans. That is to say, the light of the good is available to all humans.

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## 4.2 DEFINING (NATURAL) MORAL LAW

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The supreme principle of ethics or morality is: good is to be done and evil to be avoided. And that one principle is grounded in the ought character of the good. It is from this one principle that practical reason draws all its other individual norms. All the individual laws of moral law, to the extent they refer to the one supreme principle of moral law (do good and avoid evil), participate in the reasonability of the supreme principle.

The presuppositions of any moral philosophy are a) the capacity of practical reason to perceive truth and, b) a substratum (rudimentary basis) of human nature that remains the same through all historical changes. A genuine ethical theory must believe in the universal validity of its principles.

Natural moral law presupposes that there is a common human nature which is constant. It is from that human nature that ethical principles are drawn. Thus the objective foundation of natural moral law is the nature of human beings. Moral law exists before practical reason, i.e. practical reason discovers it because natural moral law is grounded in the basic structure of being human. Moral law, unlike emotivism, (i.e., the theory that morality is a question of emotion), is based on the nature of being human.

Natural Moral law, or the phrase “by nature”, expresses the minimum presuppositions for being an ethical subject, that is, freedom and reason. Without these, one cannot be an ethical subject. Natural law understood as the minimum pre-suppositions for being human is same for all, in every culture and age. These minimum conditions are protected by the negative commands of natural law.

Natural Moral law as an ethical theory proposes principles that are valid for all people because it contains minimum indications for being human and it defends the most basic sector (*unhintergebarer Raum*) of a human being. The minimum

of natural law that is common to all humans is applicable everywhere and is independent of revelation or divine intervention. It is available to any human as human.

Natural Moral law as a moral philosophy is against relativism and believes in the truthfulness and universal validity of moral norms. One needs natural law to be able to criticize the ideologies of one's society. In the absence of natural law one will be forced to give equal value to both cannibalism and a democratically ordered society. Natural law must be the basis for individual moral laws and civil law, and it should be independent of any religious foundation. It should be accessible to any human as human.

Thomistic natural moral law is a combination of natural reason and the natural inclinations of human towards a fulfilled life (*gelungenes Leben*). Natural law and human life goals are given in the very nature of humans. There are goals in human life and the inclinations lead one to them. The goals are recognized as good by practical reason naturally, i.e. without any other aid.

The inclinations point to the goals that lead to fulfillment in life. Knowledge of good and evil follows the order of the inclinations. There are principally three types of inclinations: The first level inclinations are those inclinations in common with all substances. These concern self-preservation. The second level inclinations are inclinations in common with all living beings. These concern social living, procreation and education of the young. Third level inclinations are inclinations that are specific to humans. They concern striving for knowledge which include knowledge about God, and desiring to live in fellowship with others. The desire to live in fellowship calls for avoidance of ignorance. The same includes the inclination not to hurt one's fellow-beings.

The inclinations in humans correspond to the dictates of practical reason. But what is the precise relationship between the two? Interpreters of Thomas, the medieval philosopher, have proposed three types of relationship between the inclinations and practical reason. The inclinations are just a frame-work. Practical reason is decisive. There is a relationship of practical reason informing the inclinations. And finally there is the position that the inclinations give detailed goals of life and practical reason just approves them. Eberhard Schockenhoff, a German ethicist, is of the view that practical reason cannot be seen as just a ratifying agent. Nor can it be that the inclinations are an unlimited amount of raw material to be given form by practical reason. According to Schockenhoff, the supreme law of practical reason diversifies into individual ethical norms and together with the inclinations they form a unity informed by reason. Reason is like a music conductor who fine-tunes the inclinations. Or again, reason is like an author who transforms the rough draft of a book (inclinations) into a coherently written book. Reason informs the inclinations and they become norms of the actions of men.

Natural inclinations show the fulfillment image (*Vollendungsgestalt*) of being human only in an outline. Reason has to devise the means towards that goal, i.e. evolve norms for the conduct of humans to realize the goal. Humans must, in the light of reason, choose concrete actions to realize the life goals. To view the inclinations as giving in detail the norms of behaviour is to go against the reservation Thomas himself had about them. It is to read into Thomas what later Scholastics (philosophers between 9<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries) said after two to three centuries.

Only those inclinations that are according to reason belong to natural moral law. The one supreme principle of natural moral law, namely, do good and avoid evil, splits into many individual norms so as to lead the inclinations to the fulfillment of human life.

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### 4.3 REASON AND MORALITY

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Humans obey a law because it is reasonable. Every law must have reason in it. The *vis obligandi* (the obligating or compelling power) of a law (*Gesetz*) does not come from outside itself but from the internal obligating character of reason itself. According to Thomas Aquinas the *regula et mensura* (rule and measure) of human acts is reason. The only criterion of morality is whether a human act is according to reason or not, i.e. if reason sanctions it or not.

The origin and validity of moral values come from practical reason. This is because it is reason that makes a law that which it is. Without reason there is no law. Reason and its law of non-contradiction finally decide about the content of any moral system. An immoral act is one that contradicts reason. It militates against reason. And it cannot be that a moral value is an importance in one place and a non-importance or its contradiction in another place.

There are two aspects in the faculty of reason in humans, namely, theoretical reason and practical reason. One is not subordinate to the other. They are not two faculties in humans but a single capacity of the self that is directed towards different objects; theoretical reason is directed towards truth in itself for its own sake, whereas practical reason is directed towards truth in so far as it has to be realized and acted upon.

The fact that both are faculties of the same soul does not rob them of their distinctiveness. These two have their own specific goals (*Ziele*). They are not subordinate to each other but they complement each other. The distinctiveness of both is shown in the fact that each has its own non-demonstrable first principles (*unbeweisbare Prinzipien*). They deduce from their own sources.

Theoretical and practical reason are complementary in the sense that the objects of their orientation can fall either in the field of theoretical reason or practical reason. The object of theoretical reason is the truth in itself. The object of practical reason is the good. The object of theoretical reason is truth in so far as it is worthwhile longing for. The object of practical reason is the good that has been discovered under the aspect of truth or as truth.

The first principles of theoretical reason are not probable. They are self-evident and they are understood by intuition. So also are the first principles of practical reason. Practical reason possesses its own naturally known and non-provable principles. They are not deduced or borrowed from theoretical reason. The first principles of practical reason are the first principles of natural law. They cannot be proved. They are intuitively known.

It belongs to practical reason to seek for the good in the light of its highest principle (do good and avoid evil). But it does not end there. It seeks further the ways or means to realize the good. Both functions belong to practical reason. Practical reason reaches the fullness of its activity to the extent it commands the recognized good to be realized. This is also called the law character of practical reason, i.e.



practical reason commands the recognized good to be executed. That is the difference of the universal propositions of practical reason from those of theoretical reason.

The judgments of practical reason do not have the same degree of certainty as those of theoretical reason because the judgments of practical reason deal with contingent events. That does not mean that they are not valid.

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#### 4.4 UNIVERSALITY AND (NATURAL) MORAL LAW

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One can think about and practice a universal ethic only if one presupposes the universal validity and reach of reason in all men. There is a human nature that does not change. So too, there is an unchanging moral law.

Only the top-most principles (*oberste Prinzipien*) of practical reason and their conclusions are universally valid. The supreme principles of practical reason are valid for all because they are grounded in the very reasonability (*Vernunftfähigkeit*) of human beings. Secondary natural moral laws are those laws that flow from the first three: do good and avoid evil, the golden rule (do unto others what you would like them to do to you) and love of neighbour. The negative laws of the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments as contained in the *Bible*) also belong to them. These laws are known to all, but they admit of exceptions. The findings of theoretical reason and their conclusions are valid for all (like the angles of an equilateral triangle are equal). That is not the case with practical reason. Except for the first or supreme principles, the findings of practical reason are contingent, i.e. they are not necessarily valid for all.

Once reason discovers a truth, it is valid for all. "It corresponds completely to the structure of historical perception of truth that such crossing of boundaries occurs in a particular time and place. Once such a discovery or crossing has taken place in the thought of the human spirit, it belongs to the permanent possession of mankind and is valid everywhere" (Schokenhoff, *Naturrecht*, p. 139). Truth once discovered is truth for all and it is independent of historical particularities. It is not dependent on being historically recognized. It transcends historical times and epochs. According to Max Scheler, as soon as a value is discovered, its validity is for all people of all time. It is so because an essential aspect of reality has been discovered. E. Troeltsch, another German philosopher, is of the same view.

Not all the commands of practical reason possess the trait (*Bewandnis*) of a law. Only the universal propositions/commands possess that. It is the aim of *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 94, articles 4 and 5 of Thomas Aquinas to show that the universal natural law branches (*auffächert*) into individual concrete norms.

It is practical reason that discovers the universal natural laws. It is again practical reason that discovers the non-universal norms applicable to particular situations. Thus there are grades in the judgements or laws of practical reason.

If it is true that there is a universal concern of reason, then it shows itself at the international level as the international human rights issues. Natural moral law expresses the dignity of the human person. Moral law lays the foundation for rights and duties. To that extent moral law is universal and its authority is over all humans. The idea that there is a right which belongs to all human beings is the

possession of mankind itself. That it has not been respected at all times does not invalidate it.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is natural moral Law?

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2. Why is natural moral law universally valid?

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**4.5 NATURAL MORAL LAW AND CHANGE**

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The different grades of certainty of the norms of practical reason and the diminishing certainty of individual concrete norms in different situations lead us to believe that moral law is an outline, formed by the supreme principles, within which reason has to find individual norms. Moral law is not a closed system with fixed norms. Only those norms that carry the tag “according to nature” are unchangeable. What concrete actions are to be classified as murder, theft and adultery will differ according to both divine and human norms/considerations.

Ethics transcends history. However, its individual norms need not be valid for every situation. The changeability and non-universality of the norms of practical reason are not due to the inborn incapacity of some humans to perceive moral norms nor is it due culpable ignorance. It is due to the contingency and diversity of situations. Besides, human nature changes in a certain sense. There are many laws of nature to which both human laws are added so as to make the true meaning of the laws correspond to the changed situation. For example, the law of not hating one’s neighbour was added to the prohibition of murder. Practical reason knows the universal laws and draws out concrete norms for the realization of the universal in the particular situation. That these concrete norms vary from place to place and do not possess the same degree of certainty of the universal norms is not a weakness or deficiency of moral law. It is, rather, due to the fact that reason is a finite reality, and concrete situations do not offer a greater degree of certainty.

Reason finds particular norms for particular situations. The experience of wise and sensitive individuals plays a crucial role here. There are exceptions to the universal laws in particular situations. For example, it is universally accepted

that borrowed things or goods given for safe-keeping must be returned. But one would not easily return the weapon of a man who is drunk and is intent on killing someone.

According to Eberhard Schockenhoff, a German ethicist, a list of laws that will not accommodate to changing situations is an unreasonable thing (*Unding*). It is impossible to write a catalogue of human rights that is valid for all time because it is impossible to get a view of the total. Moral law is not a finished catalogue of rights. It is rather the power of reason which discovers universal principles. These principles will take different forms in different cultures.

Moral law is opposed to historicism which believes that the human is an evolving creature and what s/he is will only be revealed by history. Historicism does not believe in the existence of an unchanging human nature. One has to counter historicism and say that there is a common metaphysical human nature and it is visible only in historical forms. That nature remains essentially same all through history. The moral norm which humans discover also takes place in a historical situation. But that fact does not contradict the existence of a common nature nor universal moral laws.

History is an essential dimension of humans and human nature. Because of that, that which is permanent in human nature can only be observed in historical manifestations. Humans live in history. One does not become human on account of history. One makes history on account of one's nature, on account of one's body-soul structure.

Nature and history are not opposed to each other. Humans are historical beings, i.e. one realizes oneself in history as a finite being. Human reason is also a historical reality in the sense that it realizes itself in a historical context. It does not live in the realm of the pure spirit. History is essential to humans and their nature. Thus natural rights, i.e. the idea of a moral criterion of good and evil that transcends all times and ages, must manifest itself in history. However, the dependence of reason on historical situations does not nullify its capacity to discover truth nor does it mean that a truth discovered in a historical context is valid only for that period.

Reason holds on to what has been achieved as experience (*Erfahrung*) in history. The same reason holds humans open to the new of every situation. With reason humans live in history. The same reason enables them to transcend history.

The flood of historical events and changes can make natural law appear as relative. It is true that an ethical insight is valid for all time. But its historical realization is often linked to compromises in concrete situations.

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## **4.6 NATURAL MORAL LAW AND HUMAN DIGNITY**

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There is a core sector/aspect (*unhintergebarer Schutzraum*) in a human being. That centre is the person, the source of morality, and it is the aim of morality to protect that sector. The minimum requirements of moral law are the minimum requirements of human right and human dignity. That is to say that there is a basic requirement for being moral. So too there is a basic requirement for demanding and accepting human dignity and right. Human dignity and the rights that flow from it are universal and it can be demanded from any person or

government. Respect for human dignity is not just respect for the spiritual powers and convictions of human. It is a respect for the totality of human, body and soul. Humans live their lives not as angels but as embodied beings in this world.

In moral law, right and morality are closely related. Rights are the moral claims an individual makes on another human being or human beings. To the extent that natural law thinking sees rights arising from the supreme principles of practical reason and since morality itself is grounded in practical reason, rights are closely related to morality. Human rights and ethics belong together. They protect the elementary goals and values of life. Human rights are, like values, a historical manifestation of the principles of practical reason.

Human rights are the minimum conditions, in every age, under which a human being can be seen as an ethical subject and can be held responsible for his or her deeds. Natural human rights represent the minimum of being ethical.

Natural human right is the knowledge of a moral law that is independent of human domination or despotism. International human rights are built on the basis of natural rights. Natural rights point beyond themselves. They point to the wealth of religions and the way they propose to fulfill human life.

The state upholds the rule of law (*Rechtsordnung*). Rule of law aims at the realization of a life worthy of a human being. It guarantees the minimum space human beings need to realize themselves as ethical beings. Rule of law recognizes the inalienable rights of the person and his or her duty in the community.

Human rights presuppose freedom and are grounded in reason. Precisely because of that a change in the concept of rights or the discovery of new rights is possible. According to new insights and new situations, rights (civil rights) can change. Civil rights are grounded in natural rights. According to Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde, a German ethicist, natural law and rights is a way of thinking of the practical reason. In the light of the fundamental goals of human life, it legitimizes the existing human rights. It also criticizes them and paves the way for progress in human rights.

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## 4.7 NATURAL MORAL LAW AND CONCEPT OF INTRINSIC EVIL

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If there is something intrinsically valuable, then it stands to reason to believe that there is also something intrinsically evil, because to attack the intrinsically good will be to create an intrinsically evil deed. It is inevitable to use the term “intrinsic evil” when it concerns the mutual respect a human has to show to the ethical subject.

The idea of intrinsic evil is not a special teaching of the Christian Church. It is the common property of a moral tradition starting with Aristotle and continuing in the teachings of Augustine, Thomas, Kant and all the non-utilitarians, i.e. deontological ethicists of today.

One should never do an intrinsically evil act. An intrinsically evil act is one that attacks or violates the absolute right, i.e. inalienable right of another person. An intrinsically evil act attacks the minimum conditions necessary for being human. This minimum condition is the possibility for free self-determination as an ethical

subject. An intrinsically evil act attacks the personal centre. Ready examples are rape and torture.

The negative commands of moral law prohibit intrinsically evil acts. Just as the concept of human dignity may not be able to enumerate all the laws needed to protect human dignity, so too the concept of intrinsic evil may not be able to produce an exhaustive list of intrinsically evil acts. The concept of intrinsic evil will remind humans of something which they should never do, without enumerating in detail what should be avoided as intrinsic evil in every age/epoch.

Rape, murder, torture and infidelity to one's word (breach of promise) are some of the intrinsic evil acts. The evil of rape consists in the fact that it violates the dignity of a human being. That dignity is rooted in freedom and reason. Rape is never in harmony with the respect that is due to a human being.

The innocent has an inalienable right, not to be offered as a means for the greater good of the community. It is the dignity of the other and the "in itself" value of the other (*Selbstzwecklichkeit*) that are the ontological grounds for loving humans as our neighbours for their own sake. Torture of the innocent is one of the intrinsic evils that cannot be done for any other good. Its evil consists in the fact that it violates the absolute right of the individual to determine himself/herself (*Selbstbestimmung*). Torture militates against the dignity of the innocent.

The prohibition of killing the innocent is valid in normal situations, and not in borderline cases and fictitious circumstances. There may be exceptions to the prohibition. For example, the killing of one's wounded fellow soldier so as to prevent him from falling into enemy hands which would mean torture and death. So also the killing of a man who cannot be extricated from a burning car after an accident. But even these killings are against the dictum: thou shall not kill. The body is the manifestation of a person. The prohibition to kill refers to the bodily existence of the human being. Humans are called to be reasonable beings. But they cannot exist reasonably without a body. Thus the command not to kill is a call to respect the dignity of the human as a bodily existing being.

In this context Schockenhoff refers to both teleologism and deontologism. For one, remaining faithful to teleologism, it is not possible to defend the concept of intrinsic evil. Teleologists may respect the command not to kill the innocent. But that is not out of the conviction that there are intrinsically evil acts, but because they feel that respecting the command not to kill the innocent will bring more benefit to society in the long run. Both teleologism and deontologism are complementary. While deciding about goods other than human beings, teleologism is in order. But while deciding about human beings, their dignity, etc., deontologism is absolutely necessary.

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## 4.8 CRITICISM OF NATURAL MORAL LAW

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In the light of the supreme moral principle, - good is to be done and evil to be avoided - practical reason orders the inclinations. The ordering function of practical reason depends on the order of the inclinations in setting up the *ordo praeceptorum*. The inclinations are pre-moral. Practical reason orders them to the fulfillment goal of man. The inclinations receive their moral quality through reason to the extent that reason invests in them the criterion of good and bad.

That there are certain basic drives in humans is undeniable. Modern humans, with an improved knowledge over descriptive or positive sciences, are in a better position to understand the drives/inclinations than Aquinas was in the thirteenth century.

The second criticism of Thomistic natural moral law is that it commits the fallacy of *petitio principii*. It reasons as follows: The concept of nature is an empty shell that is filled with arbitrary (*beliebig*) contents from sociology or anthropology, and the content is invested with the dignity of being ethical. *Petitio principii* is precisely the fact that, instead of proving the ethical dignity of the content, it is presupposed that the arbitrarily filled content of the concept of nature is ethical.

But the very existence of different grades of truth in the concept of natural moral law contradicts this accusation of *petitio principii*. If the content of the term nature was filled arbitrarily and then given ethical dignity, then every element of the content must have the same degree of certainty. That is not the case with Thomistic natural moral law. It is not true that Aquinas fills the empty shell of the concept of nature with any content. Rather he enumerates the basic presuppositions of morality in the concept of nature. They are: The human is a being of reason and is responsible for his/her being. As rational creatures, humans ought to recognize the “good and true” for the very being of humankind, and that very recognition brings them to their integral fulfillment. The human’s inclinations have an orientation towards the good and the true, and reason recognizes the good and the true and approves them. Finally, humans realize themselves as a body-soul reality necessarily in relation with other human beings and in harmony with the orientation of their soul towards the good and the true. These presuppositions are not just arbitrary principles (*Festlegungen*) from which arbitrary norms are drawn. Rather these are the very conditions that make morality possible at all.

The third criticism is that Thomas Aquinas has an unhistorical/unchanging understanding of human nature. The answer to this is that Thomas Aquinas does concede change in human nature. That is evident in the two levels of practical reason. The second level does admit of change of norms in different situations and a change in human nature in the sense of living human life differently in different epochs/ages. When Aquinas speaks of a change in human nature he does not mean that man becomes something other than human.

Human nature changes but an unchanging element is presupposed in every age and culture. This is evident from the concept of human dignity which is valid for all generations. Human dignity does not increase or decrease with the passage of time. That humans have certain rights on account of their dignity will also remain stable. What will change is only the way the rights are realized. For example, women had no voting rights in certain epochs.

Human nature manifests itself in different ways in different cultures. The cave human’s being human is different from the urban human’s being human. But they both remain humans. Human nature has to manifest itself in a particular culture, but no culture exhausts it. It transcends all historical manifestations.

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## 4.9 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have discussed natural moral law and its universality. We have seen how there is an essential relationship between moral values and reason. The

good manifests itself to reason. Or, it is only in the light of reason that the good becomes visible. The *vis obligandi* of any law is that it is reasonable, and the essence of moral evil is that it is against the order of reason.

We have seen that natural moral law is the law discovered by reason in humans. Moral law is inherent in the nature of humans, the core of which does not change. The basis of every good positive law is natural moral law. We have also seen that one cannot understand the concept of intrinsic evil without natural moral law. The discovery of the good leads to the discovery of the evil in itself.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Does natural moral law change?

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2. What is intrinsic evil?

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## 4.10 KEY WORDS

**Law :** *Law* is a system of rules, usually enforced through a set of institutions.

**Nature :** The word nature is derived from the Latin word *natura*, meaning “birth.” *Natura* was a Latin translation of the Greek word *physis*, which originally related to the intrinsic characteristics that plants, animals, and other features of the world develop of their own accord.

## 4.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 4.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. It is the natural moral law discovered by reason in the rational nature of man.
2. Natural moral law is universally valid because it is based on a human nature that is universally the same.

### Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. The natural moral law does not change. Its application to individual situations changes.
2. An intrinsically evil act is one that attacks the absolute right of another human being, no matter what the social benefit of that act is. Just as reason perceives the most basic natural law, so too it perceives certain acts as intrinsically evil.



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## UNIT 5 MORAL RELATIVISM\*

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### Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Definition
- 5.3 Different types of Moral relativism
- 5.4 Philosophical Views
- 5.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.6 Key Words
- 5.7 Further Readings and References
- 5.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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There is no single method to understand the concept of morality. Moreover, many a times there are varied confusions regarding morality because many philosophers consider morality to be illusion. There are many moral positions out of which moral relativism is one of the most popular one. It provides that we be bound at least by practices and codes of our culture, preferences, age group, and so forth. This unit presents,

- the philosophical meaning of the doctrine of moral relativism,
- views of various kind of moral relativism

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Philosophers have divided ethical theories into three general subject areas-Normative ethics, Meta ethics, and applied ethics. Normative ethics is also called prescriptive ethics as it studies the moral problems and seeks to discover how one ought to act. It does not investigate the facts of one's actions. More specifically, this discipline is concerned with judgments in setting up norms for when an act is right or wrong. It takes on a more practical task, which is to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. This might involve articulating the good habits that we should acquire, the duties that we should follow. For example, honesty should be inculcated and dishonesty be discouraged. Applied ethics involves examining specific controversial issues such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights etc. Metaethics is also called analytical ethics. This discipline is concerned with elucidating the meaning of ethical terms. It asks 'what is' e.g. goodness, excellence, right, amoral and so on. It investigates where our ethical principles come from and what they mean. Are they human constructions or do they involve human emotions?

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Two questions that are prominent in Meta-ethics are- (1) Whether morality exists independent of humans or it depends on humans, and (2) What is the underlying mental basis of our moral judgments and conduct. Meta ethics is the most abstract area of moral philosophy as it does not ask what acts, or what kind of acts are good or bad, right or wrong; rather it asks about the nature of goodness and badness, what it is to be morally right or wrong. Meta-ethical positions may be divided according to how they respond to such questions. The biggest controversy in meta-ethics is the division between moral realists and moral anti-realists. Moral realists hold that moral facts are objective facts that are out there in the world independent of any human attitudes. Things are good or bad independent of us, and we come along and discover morality. Proponents of moral realism are called as realists or objectivists. Moral realism believes that objective values or moral facts are parts or the fabric of the universe. Moral anti-realists hold that moral facts are not out there in the world until we put them there, that the facts about morality are determined by us. In this view, morality is not something that we discover but something that we invent. For anti-realists, there is no moral truth when it comes to moral judgments and that anything goes when it comes to morality. Moral anti-realism can involve either a denial that moral properties exist at all or the acceptance that they do exist but that their existence is mind dependent. There are several different forms depending on whether ethical statements are believed to be subjective claims (Ethical subjectivism), not genuine claims at all (non-cognitivism) or mistaken objective claims (moral nihilism). Ethical subjectivism should not be confused with moral relativism. Ethical relativism is broader than ethical subjectivism. Ethical subjectivism holds that moral statements are made true or false by the attitudes or conventions of the observers or that any ethical sentence implies an attitude held by someone. Ethical relativism is the view that for a thing to be morally right is to be approved by the society, leading to the conclusion that different things are right for people in different societies and periods in history.

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## 5.2 DEFINITION

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Ethical relativism or Moral relativism is more easily understood in comparison to moral absolutism or moral objectivism. Absolutism claims that morality relies on universal principles (natural law, conscience). Moral absolutism is the ethical belief that there are absolute standards against which moral questions can be judged, and that certain actions are right or wrong, regardless of the context of the act. Thus, actions are inherently moral or immoral, regardless of the beliefs and goals of the individual, society, or culture that engages in the actions. For example- Christian absolutists believe that God is the ultimate source of our common morality, and that it is therefore as unchanging as He is. 'Honesty is the best policy' is true or correct independent of any human's acceptance or rejection. Moral relativism asserts that morality is not based on any absolute standard. Rather ethical truths depend on variables such as situation, culture, one's feelings, etc. That is, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the moral norms of the society in which it is practiced. The same action may be morally right in one society but be morally wrong in another. For example, an extra marital affair is condemnable to some societies while it is acceptable to others. For the ethical relativists, there are no universal moral standards- standards that can be universally applied to all people at all times. The only moral standards against which a society's practices can be judged are its own. There is no common framework in order to

resolve moral disputes or for reaching agreement on ethical matters among members of different societies. For moral relativists there is no one right answer to any ethical question. Moral relativism is a view that rejects the notion that there is one, universally valid morality, which can be discovered by valid moral reasoning.

Moral relativists endorse that-(1) Moral judgment is true or false and actions are right or wrong only relative to some particular standpoint. (2) No standpoint can be proved objectively superior to other. All attempts to define morality in terms of some common claim fails, for they all rest on premises that belong to the standpoint being defended and need not be accepted by people who do not share that point of view. One moral outlook cannot be conclusively proved superior to another does not mean however that it cannot be judged superior. Moral relativism rejects that moral values are naturalistic or non-naturalistic- are real or objective in the sense of being independent from human belief or culture. Such a position instead insists on the fundamentally anthropocentric nature of morality. According to this view, moral values are not out there in the world at all but are created by human perspectives and needs. These needs and perspectives can vary from person to person or from culture to culture. It is difficult to imagine human beings without the practice of evaluation and moral appraisal. What exactly does a moral relativist claim? For illustration let us consider an example. Runa opens a letter addressed to her teenage daughter Udeshna, written by Udeshna's American boyfriend Smith. Runa thinks she has a right to know about her daughter's love life, while Smith thinks this violates Udeshna's privacy. Runa's view is supported by her culture and values, while Smith's view is supported by his own culture and values. A moral relativist might say that the judgment that Runa ought not open the letter is correct relative to Smith's system of values, and that at the same time, the same judgment is not correct relative to Runa's system of values. We always assess an action or human behavior as right or wrong.

Yet, in spite of seeming significance, there are some people who are skeptical about morality- about whether such a thinking as a truly universal moral system and whether moral claims are true or just a matter of opinions. Some argue that what is morally good is a matter of taste or a matter of convention. This view can be traced back to historian Herodotus who noted that there is an enormous cultural diversity on moral issues- in some countries cannibalism is permissible and in others, it is immoral. Similarly, eating beef is acceptable to some while for others it is immoral. Moral relativists do not deny that moral claims are true or false- only that truth-value is relative. Relativism maintains that there are no universal moral truths at all, where universalism is understood as true or false across all cultures. The moral relativist claims not only that the correctness of moral judgments can in this way depend on a thinker, or on the value system relevant to the thinker, but also there is no privileged correct value system. Thus a relativist's core claims are (1) moral judgements are relative, (2) There is no unique authority by which the correctness of all moral judgments must be assessed. The fact on which the correctness of moral judgments is claimed to depend may vary. Some types of relativists may claim that it depends on certain psychological characteristics of the judge. Others claim that it depends on sociological facts about the judge.

Many ethicists reject the theory of ethical relativism. Some claim that while moral practices of societies may differ, but the fundamental moral principles underlying these practices do not. For example, in some societies, killing one's parents after they reached a certain age was common practice, stemming from the belief that

people were better off in the afterlife if they entered it while still physically active and vigorous. While such a practice would be condemned in our society, we would agree with these societies on the underlying moral principle- the duty to care for parents. Societies, then, may differ in their application of fundamental moral principles but agree on principles. Also, it is argued that some moral beliefs are culturally relative whereas others are not. Certain practices, such as customs regarding dress and decency, may depend on local custom whereas other practices, such as slavery, torture, or political repression is governed by universal moral standards and is judged wrong despite many other differences.

For Relativists, the truth of the moral claim depends completely on the beliefs that are common to the culture in which the judgment is made. Readers might confuse moral relativism with moral subjectivism. There lies a thin difference between both these terms. Ethical subjectivism is not ethical relativism because ethical subjectivism believes that individuals create their own morality i.e. existence of morality can be dictated by individual experiences as there can be no objective truth. People’s beliefs about actions being right or wrong, good or bad, depend on how people feel about actions rather than on reason or system ethical analysis. The truth and falsity of moral utterances depends on the attitudes of people. A moral subjectivist would argue that the statement “ Rohit was evil” expresses a strong dislike for the sorts of things Rohit did, but it does not follow that it is true or false that Rohit was in fact evil. Both the terms are compatible in the sense that truth of moral claims is relative to the attitudes of individuals.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is moral relativism?

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2. How is moral relativism different from moral absolutism?

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3. Is moral relativism same as moral subjectivism?

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### 5.3 DIFFERENT TYPES OF MORAL RELATIVISM

The denial of universalism is a popular view because of the fact that some think that in order to be tolerant of others, we need to reject universalism with respect to truth in morality and instead ascribe to relativism. Different people arrive at different understandings and there are no basic moral demands that apply to everyone. When one explores the history of humankind, one cannot but be struck by a profound lack of consensus on many questions. Different societies and cultures and different people within the same society or culture appear to have dramatically different moral beliefs and practices. For instance, the moralities of some societies pronounce that abortion is unacceptable. The moral codes of other societies permit abortion. In light of such deep differences in moral beliefs and practices it is obvious to many that there are no universal, generally applicable moral principles, rules, and values, valid for all places and issues. Morality has no objective, rational basis, that there are no objective moral truths upon which all reasonable people could be expected to agree were they fully aware of all the relevant facts and information. When it comes to morality many say that “everything is relative.”

Moral relativism can be understood in several ways-

- (1) **Descriptive Relativism-** Descriptive relativism is also known as cultural relativism. It states that beliefs or standards about moral issues are relative to different individuals and different societies i.e. different individuals and different societies accept different moral beliefs and thus disagree about the answers to moral questions. For example, some societies condemn abortion; others accept it. In some cultures, women are not allowed to enter the kitchen in her menstruating days.

Descriptive relativism denies that there are any moral universal claims that every human culture endorses. Richard Brandt has used the term descriptive relativism to refer to the view that there are fundamental disagreements about the moral beliefs or moral standards of different individuals or different societies. It is simply a claim about how things are, it is not a normative or evaluative judgment of any sort; the act of polygamy is morally permissible in one culture and forbidden in another.

- (2) **Moral requirement relativism or normative relativism-** This states that different basic moral requirements apply to different moral agents, or groups of agents owing to different intentions, desires or beliefs among such agents or groups. Normative relativism states that moral requirements binding on a person depend on or are relative to her intentions, desires, or beliefs. Normative moral relativism is the idea that all societies should accept each other’s differing moral values, given that there are no universal moral principles. For example, just because bribery is accepted in some cultures does not mean that other cultures cannot rightfully condemn it. Since nobody is right or wrong, we ought to tolerate the behavior of others. Normative relativism is the view that it is wrong to judge or interfere with the moral beliefs and practices of cultures that operate with a different moral framework to one’s own so that what goes on in a society can only be judged by the norms of that society. Two common forms are-

- (a) **Individual moral requirement relativism** states that an action is morally

obligatory for a person if and only if that action is prescribed as part of the basic moral principles accepted by an individual.

- (b) **Social moral requirement relativism** states that an action is morally obligatory for a person if and only if that action is prescribed as part of the basic moral principles accepted by that person’s society. This is the most popular form of moral relativism.
- (3) **Metaethical relativism-** It states that moral judgments are not objectively true or false and thus that different individuals or societies can hold conflicting moral judgments. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to think and act as though our own moral views or those of our society or culture are obviously correct. It holds that moral judgments are not true or false in any absolute sense but only relative to particular standpoints. Saying that the truth of moral claims is relative to some standpoint should not be confused with the idea that it is relative to the situation in which it is made. It states that there are no moral objective grounds for preferring the moral values of one culture to another. Societies make their moral choices based on the unique beliefs, customs, and practices. Moreover, people tend to believe that ‘right’ moral values are values that exist in their own culture. They do not only believe that people disagree about moral issues but that the terms such as good, bad, right and wrong do not stand subject to universal truth conditions at all. Rather they are relative to traditions, practices of individuals or of groups. Most forms of meta-ethical relativism envision moral values as constructed for different, and sometimes-incommensurable human purposes such as social coordination and so forth. This view is called Moral constructivism and is explicitly endorsed by Gilbert Harman. Another view of moral relativism states that moral values are constructed by divine commands- idealized by human rationality or social contract between competing interests. This is called Divine-command Theory.

**Check Your Progress II**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the different types of moral relativism?

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2. What is the nature of meta-ethical relativism?

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## 5.4 PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS

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In philosophical discussions, the term 'moral relativism' is primarily used to denote the meta ethical thesis that the correctness of moral judgments is relative to some factor, i.e. relative to an individual's or group's moral norms. Strictly speaking, there is more than one way of understanding this doctrine. It encompasses views and arguments that people in various cultures have held over several years ago. The ancient Jaina Philosophy gives the theory of *Anekantavada*. According to this theory means that reality is not absolute in nature and there are many sides to it. There is no single point of view, which portrays the complete truth or reality. The same principle was articulated by the Greek sophist Protagoras (c 481-420 B.C). This principle enjoyed a revival following the anthropological discoveries of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Protagoras asserted famously that *Man is the measure of all things*. It arose from the observation that other societies survived perfectly well, in spite of having different moral codes from those the observers were brought up in. The Greek historian Herodotus (c 484-420 B.C) observed that each society regards its own belief system and way of doing things better than all others do. Various philosophers questioned the idea of an objective standard of morality. This in turn led to doubt that there was only one correct set of values. Its guiding thought is that *there is more than just one true morality*. There is no one system of morality- say Christian or Islamic- which is binding at all times in all places. Different cultures, at different times and places, have different ways of life and moral practices. It is possible that all such practices are correct. A moral system is not true absolutely, but true for a particular culture, or a particular individual. Is moral relativism true? To answer this question, we had better be clear what sorts of truths are meant to be relative and what sorts are not. For many people inclined towards moral relativism end up saying that all truth is relative-not just moral truth. According to them, there is no such thing as a detached, objective perspective on truth: all judgment is made from within a particular standpoint. It is inevitable that this growing uncertainty led to increased tolerance and acceptance of other ways of life. The truth of relativism entails that we should not morally judge others. The idea was that moral beliefs and practices are bound up with customs and conventions, and these vary greatly between societies. Even though moral relativism made its first appearance in ancient times, it hardly flourished. Many scholars see its reappearance in the writings of Montaigne. In the centuries following, further trends in modern philosophy helped prepare the way for moral relativism. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Hobbes argued for a social contract view of morality that sees moral rules like laws, as something humans agree upon in order to make social living possible. According to Hobbes moral tenets are not right or wrong according to whether they correspond to some transcendent ideas, rather they should be appraised pragmatically according to how well they serve their purpose. In the early modern era, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1673) notably held that nothing is inherently good or bad. For he sees that the attribution of qualities like goodness or perfection are errors that are based upon the false belief that nature is designed by God with humanity in mind. This family of concepts, which includes moral and aesthetic concepts along with concepts of sensible qualities, holds to be produced by the imagination rather than reason. David Hume (1711-1776) in several important respects serves as the father of emotivism and moral relativism. He argues that prescriptions saying how we should act cannot be

logically derived from factual claims about the way beings are. He raised doubts about the possibility of proving the correctness of any particular moral point of view. For him, morality is based ultimately on feelings rather than on reason. However, he does not espouse relativism but distinguishes between matters of fact and matters of value. He suggested that moral judgments consist of matters of value for they do not deal with verifiable facts obtained from the world; but only with our sentiments and passions. He famously claimed that morality has objective standards and suggested that the universe remains indifferent to preferences and our troubles. Nietzsche (1844-1900) emphasized the need to analyze our moral values and how much impact they may have on us. The problem, Nietzsche found, in conventional morality is, that it does not give scope to our self-creating capacity. Nietzsche called it “will to power”. Therefore, conventional morality becomes a threat to human freedom or human potentiality to create something. His famous pronouncement that “God is dead” implies that the idea of transcendent or objective justification for moral claims is no longer credible. According to Nietzsche, one remains strange to oneself while one is following the imposed rules and regulation. These imposing rules and regulations were done earlier by religions in the name of a supernatural being (God). Instead of using our reason, we go with religion by faith. Religion hides our real identity by imposing rules and regulation and making us follow it. Here we simply accept and follow what we are told to be “good,” and “bad.” Here our life lacks the self-reflective and self-creating capacity. According to Nietzsche, “we are not ‘knower’ when it comes to ourselves.” He believed that morality should be constructed actively, making them relative to who we are and what as an individual we think about good and bad action, instead of reacting to moral laws made by a certain group of individuals in power. Edward Westermarck (1862-1939), an anthropologist ranks as one of the first to formulate a detailed theory of moral relativism. He portrayed all moral ideas as subjective judgments that reflect one’s upbringing.

**Check Your Progress III**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the arguments given by Nietzsche on moral relativism?

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Moral relativism has become an increasingly popular view because of the following reasons-

- (1) **The downfall stage of religion-** Religion seems to offer the possibility that morality was independent of us. With a turning away from religion there seems to have come a certain amount of doubt about the possibility of objective morality. We have, the moral relativist says, no better place to look than to the individual or his society.



- (2) **The observing of cultural diversity-** Most of us are aware that the world contains many different cultures and that some of those cultures engage in practices very different from our own. Given all these, there can be no single objective morality because morality varies with cultures. This is the most commonly cited reason given in favor of ethical relativism and is the undeniable fact of widespread difference of opinion on important moral questions. Some societies have considered slavery to be within the natural order of things while others have condemned it as a moral abomination. Many individual sees abortion as nothing short of murder, while others condemn attempts to prevent abortion as unacceptable violations of a woman's right to control her own reproductive processes. In light of such vast differences of opinions it is not reasonable to believe in an objective moral truth. If such objective standards would not exist, there would be a good deal of agreement on moral matters than one actually discovers.

The theory of ethical relativism has some serious disadvantages and we can point out some arguments against moral relativism. One of the most powerful arguments is regarding the existence of some objective moral truths. Another flaw is that given the extent of disagreement about moral issues, it follows that there are no objective moral truths. Relativism tells us little or nothing about how actually people should behave. For much the same reason, the position of the moral reformer or critic is commonly thought to be incoherent if ethical relativism is true. Suppose the cultures whose moral practices Rina wishes to criticize are not someone else's but her own. Suppose that Rina is the one who lives in a society whose conventional moral practices clearly incorporate the institution of slavery and that Rina rejects this terrible view completely. She sincerely believes slavery to be morally wrong. In fact, she believes it to be an abomination, which must be eradicated from all civilized societies. Suppose now that Rina makes the following claim to anyone who will listen: "Slavery is morally wrong." If moral relativism is true, then, *prima facie* her claim is necessarily incorrect or false, as anyone who cared to do so could easily demonstrate. Since slavery is, as a matter of fact, morally sanctioned by the conventional standards of her society, it appears to follow from moral relativism that Rina's critical claim cannot be right. At best she can be interpreted as saying — on some ground other than morality — that slavery should not be moral. Perhaps she could argue, on purely prudential grounds, that our collective self-interest suggests that we should ban slavery because it eventually leads to serious social instability. Or perhaps she could argue, on strictly economic grounds, that slavery is an inefficient system of production better replaced by a fully open, free-market system in which former slaves are economically motivated to contribute productively to the economy. All of these are possible reasons for criticizing the practice of slavery as it is found within Rina's society. But none serves as a moral reason. If moral relativism is true, it would seem that Rina cannot intelligently deny that slavery is, as a matter of fact, a morally justified practice. Rina seems to be left with no intelligible space in which to criticize her culture's practices on moral grounds. Failure to provide intelligible space for the moral reformer is a serious shortcoming of any theory of morality.

Moreover, relativism is logically incoherent. Consider the statement: all truth is relative. If this statement is objectively true, then relativism is false because there is at least one objective truth- namely, the truth that truth is relative. But if the statement is only subjectively true, then as we have already seen, this just means

that you believe in relativism. Thus, by claiming that truth is relative you either contradict yourself or make a trivial claim with nothing to recommend your belief.

**Check Your Progress IV**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What are the two reasons that have popularized the concept of moral relativism?

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**5.5 LET US SUM UP**

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Moral relativism means that a belief, idea, proposition, claim, etc. is never true or false, good or bad, right or wrong, absolutely. According to the moral relativist, there exist conflicting claims that are both true. In short, ethical relativism denies that there is any objective truth about right and wrong. Ethical judgments are not true or false because there is no objective moral truth- x is right –for a moral judgment to correspond with. In brief, morality is relative, subjective, and non-universally binding and disagreements about ethics are like disagreements about which flavor of toffee is best. And what specifically might morality be relative to? Usually morality is thought to be relative to a group’s or individual’s beliefs, emotions, opinions, wants, desires, interests, preferences, feelings etc. There are three ways of understanding moral relativism- cultural moral relativism, normative moral relativism, and meta-ethical moral relativism. The theory of moral relativism has its roots in ancient Greek Philosopher Protagoras and flourished through modern times from Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume, and Nietzsche. Moreover, relativism is neither supported by our inability to know what’s true, nor by the fervency of our belief in relativism. It is a claim that all things are relative that are incoherent or illogical.

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**5.6 KEY WORDS**

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**Subjectivism:** Subjectivism is the philosophical tenet that our mental activity is the only unquestionable fact. The truth and falsity of moral utterances are dependent on the attitudes of people.

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**5.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES**

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## 5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to check your progress I

1. Moral relativism asserts that morality is not based on any absolute standard. Rather ethical truths depend on variables such as situation, culture, one's feelings, etc. That is, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the moral norms of the society in which it is practiced. The same action may be morally right in one society but be morally wrong in another. For example, an extra marital affair is condemnable to some societies while it is acceptable to others. Moral relativists endorse that-(1) Moral judgment is true or false and actions are right or wrong only relative to some particular standpoint. (2) No standpoint can be proved objectively superior to others. All attempts to define morality in terms of some common claim fails, for they all rest on premises that belong to the standpoint being defended and need not be accepted by people who do not share that point of view.
2. Ethical relativism or Moral relativism is more easily understood in comparison to moral absolutism or moral objectivism. Absolutism claims that morality relies on universal principles inherent in the natural law, conscience or some other fundamental source. For example- Christian absolutists believe that God is the ultimate source of our common morality, and that it is therefore as unchanging as He is. 'Honesty is the best policy' is true or correct independent of any human's acceptance or rejection. Moral absolutism is the ethical belief that there are absolute standards against which moral questions can be judged, and that certain actions are right or wrong, regardless of the context of the act. Thus, actions are inherently moral or immoral, regardless of the beliefs and goals of the individual, society, or culture that engages in the actions.
3. There is a thin difference between moral or ethical relativism and moral or ethical subjectivism Ethical relativism is broader than ethical subjectivism. Ethical subjectivism holds that moral statements are made true or false by the attitudes or conventions of the observers or that any ethical sentence implies an attitude held by someone. Ethical relativism is the view that for a thing to be morally right it must be approved by the society, leading to the conclusion that different things are right for people in different societies and periods in history. For the relativists, the concern is not about whether moral judgments exist or not but whether they are true or false relatively i.e.

depending either on the moral framework of the individual or groups. Ethical subjectivism believes that individuals create their own morality i.e. existence of morality can be dictated by individual experiences as there can be no objective truth. People's beliefs about actions being right or wrong, good or bad, depend on how people feel about actions rather than on reason or system ethical analysis. The truth and falsity of moral utterances depend on the attitudes of people. An ethical subjectivist would argue that the statement "Rohit was evil" expresses a strong dislike for the sorts of things Rohit did, but it does not follow that it is true or false that Rohit was in fact evil. Both the terms are compatible in the sense that truth of moral claims is relative to the attitudes of individuals.

### Answers to check your progress II

1. There are three types of moral relativism- (1) Descriptive relativism or cultural relativism, (2) Normative relativism or moral requirement relativism and (3) Meta ethical relativism.
2. Meta ethical relativism- It states that moral judgments are not objectively true or false and thus that different individuals or societies can hold conflicting moral judgments. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to think and act as though our own moral views or those of our society or culture are obviously correct. It holds that moral judgments are not true or false in any absolute sense but only relative to particular standpoints. It states that there are no moral objective grounds for preferring the moral values of one culture to another. Societies make their moral choices based on their unique beliefs, customs, and practices. Moreover, people tend to believe that 'right' moral values are values that exist in their own culture. They do not only believe that people disagree about moral issues but that the terms such as good, bad, right and wrong do not stand subject to universal truth conditions at all rather are relative to traditions, practices of individuals or of groups.

### Answers to check your progress III

1. Nietzsche's argument of morality sets a firm base for the theory of moral relativism. For him, what is right or good depends on those who are in power. He does not believe in an objective or universal morality, which he termed as conventional morality. His famous pronouncement that "God is dead" implies that the idea of transcendent or objective justification for moral claims is no longer credible. According to Nietzsche, one remains strange to oneself while one is following the imposed rules and regulation. This imposing of rules and regulations were done earlier by religions in the name of a supernatural being (God). Instead of using our reason, we go with religion by faith. Religion hides our real identity by imposing rules and regulation and making us follow it. Here we simply accept and follow what we are told to be "good," and "bad." Here our life lacks the self-reflective and self-creating capacity. According to Nietzsche, "we are not 'knower' when it comes to ourselves." He believed that morality should be constructed actively, making them relative to who we are and what we as individuals good and bad etc.

### Answers to check your progress IV

1. Moral relativism has become an increasingly popular view because of the following two reasons-
  - (1) The downfall stage of religion- Religion seems to offer the possibility

that morality was independent of us. With a turning away from religion there seems to have come a certain amount of doubt about the possibility of objective morality. We have, the moral relativist says, no better place to look than to the individual or his society.

2. Observing the cultural diversity- Most of us are aware that the world contains many different cultures and that some of those cultures engage in practices very different from our own. Given all these, diversity there can be no single objective morality because morality varies with cultures. This is the most commonly cited reason given in favor of Moral Relativism is the undeniable fact of widespread difference of opinion on important moral questions. Some societies have considered slavery to be within the natural order of things while others have condemned it as moral abominations. Many individual views abortion as nothing short of murder, while others condemn attempts to prevent abortion as unacceptable violations of a woman's right to control her own reproductive processes. In light of such vast differences of opinions it is not reasonable to believe in an objective moral truth. If such objective standards would not exist, there would be a good deal of agreement on moral matters than one actually discovers.



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