

**ETHICS AND ABSOLUTE VALUES: CONNECTION WITH SOCIETY AND RELIGION****Ali Murad Syed\*****Abstract**

*In this paper we discuss that ethical values change with society and time. Ethical values are societal customs which take the shape of values with the passage of time. Utilitarianism theory of ethics says that actions should be judged on the basis of their results. In this paper we also discuss that there is no absolute standard about conscience, right or wrong and conscience of one person is not applicable to another person. Decision of conscience is not an authority for another person and vice versa. All ethical theories are based on doing what is right or wrong for a good society. Two foundations of ethics are discussed in this paper: one is based upon religion and the other one without religion. Whether ethics is based on religion or not, its focus is on humanity and to do something good for society.*

**Introduction**

“Telling a lie is a not a good thing”. This sentence we might have heard throughout our life. Not only heard but we may speak this sentence many times in our life. There is no doubt that this sentence is true and a universal truth. Do we ever think that what the meaning of this sentence is or what is the meaning of “not a good thing” or a “bad thing”? We might say that to tell a lie is a bad thing because its results are bad. We might say that bad results are results which create problems for human beings. Do we ever think about how many times we had problems after telling truth? This means that to tell truth creates problems for us but we will never say that “telling a truth is not a good thing”. We will always say that a lie is bad and truth is a good thing. We might say that telling a lie is a bad thing because due to this act, a man loses respect in the eyes of society. It means that a lie is not bad but because society does not respect liars, it is bad. It means that if society does not feel bad about liars, then lying would not be bad. But we will say that lying will always be bad and argument that things which are bad in society are bad and things which are good in society are good seems not valid. Lying is bad whether society accepts it as good or bad.

Let us suppose that we are sitting outside your house and suddenly we see an old man who says that a murderer is behind him and he is hiding in your house. In the meantime a person with a pistol in his hand comes and asks about the old man. Do we tell him the truth so that this person kills that innocent man? We will say that telling a lie is not bad sometimes. Before we were saying that lying is a bad thing but now we say that sometimes it is good. This means that your argument that “always tells truth” remains not valid. Do we ever think about what is bad, what is good, why telling a lie is bad, is telling a lie always bad or sometimes is good? Is good always good or bad is always bad or does it change according to conditions? These are some of the questions of Ethics. Kant (1788) define Ethics as” Laws according to what ought to happen”. This means that all depends on ought. What kind of society should be or should not be. Socrates says that original virtue is to learn what virtue is and what evil is. Ethics changes with societies and time. This shows that ethical values are societal customs which take the form of values with the passage of time.

**Utility Value**

According to the Utilitarianism theory of ethics, the standard of good or evil is “the action which gives benefit is a good and action which doesn’t give benefit is an evil”. This is called utility value. Actions should be judged on the basis of their results. No action is good or bad in itself but the criteria should be the results or outcomes. One action might be good at one time and becomes evil second time because results depend on external circumstances. But virtue is the action which gives benefit to maximum number of people “the greatest good of the greatest number”.

**Virtue or Conscience**

There is something inside us which tells us which is wrong or right. This is called virtue or conscience. Some people say that if we had to decide about some action, then we should ask our heart whether it is good or not.

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Whatever is decided in heart, it becomes good or bad. If conscience approves, it becomes good otherwise bad. In other words we can say that there is some force inside us which forbids us from doing wrong but the question arises about decision of this force. Whether this force decides that anything is intrinsically wrong or not and that's why we should avoid this. If this force has the ability then we don't need to think about ethics. But we see that conscience of different people give different decisions about right or wrong and voice of conscience is different for everyone. Some people say that conscience is not a permanent standard. Its decisions change with time. That's why the decision of right or wrong should be decided on the basis of arguments. This shows that there is no absolute standard about conscience and its decision about right or wrong.

Lan Freed (1948) discusses issues of conscience, right and wrong and according to him if the voice of conscience is accepted as a sign of right or wrong, then this acceptance will become authority for that person. Decision of conscience will not be authority for another person and vice versa. Freed says that the conscience cannot say about right or wrong decision of other persons. There is no absolute conscience. Each person has its own conscience and its work is to control the sentiments according to his or her own standards. Every man has an internal power called conscience and thinks that some things are good and some bad. In other words, every person has some concepts of values.

### **Pre-Modern Ethical and Moral Thoughts**

Prior (1991) states that the ancient Greeks thought primarily in terms of good and bad and those notions were not exclusively moral ones, but embraced every aspect of human life. The primary question the Greeks sought to answer was not "What actions are universally and morally right?" Instead, it was:» What is the best sort of life for human beings to live?" Greek thinkers saw the attainment of a good life as the telos, the end or goal of human existence. For most Greek philosophers, the end is eudaimonia, which is usually translated as "happiness". However, according to the Greeks, happiness meant much more than to experience pleasure or satisfaction.

Socrates was the first person in history to have a clear idea of what constitutes a logical argument and he chose to apply his methods of arguments and deductions to the subject "Ethics". His most important and essential teachings in this realm states that two things:

1. Virtue is knowledge
2. Vice is ignorance

According to Socrates, the primary step to moral virtue is to know you and he calls the "reasons" the key to practicing virtues. In other words it means "understanding". He says the knowing yourself is to know your soul and happiness of your soul comes only through virtue. You will love your virtue as you love yourself and happiness. If you don't love virtue that way and you love vice instead. The main reason of this is you don't really understand. Evil only comes when reason is not working properly. The mind does play an indispensable part in both good and evil. Animals are not moral agents because they don't have rational or self-conscious minds. Without such a mind there are no moral goals or evil. But is the mind only factor? Is anything missing? What are the causes of lack of wisdom? One voice comes from our reason or consciousness and second voices comes from our desires. It is you that cast the deciding vote between these two.

Socrates philosophy is known through the writings of his student Plato and according to his philosophy living well is the most important thing. Grounded in Socrates teachings, Plato's philosophical system is intensively concerned with the quality of human life and contains a persistent ethical spread. He believed in absolute values rooted in an external world and described four virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance or self-control, and justice. This idea distinguished him from predecessors and successors. We see these four things as the basis of ethics in today's world.

Aristotle's ethical theory is teleological in the sense that it contains certain propositions about the purpose of man, his place in society, and what is good and bad for him. What follows is a brief overview of the Ethics with particular reference to the virtues. Ethics originates with the written work of Aristotle. Aristotle follows Socrates and Plato in taking the virtues as a central of a well defined life. For Aristotle, Ethics is the inquiry into human good. What is the highest of all good attainable by actions? He dismisses the pursuit of wealth as contender of best life. He defined moral virtues as state of character, neither a passion nor a capacity. Virtue could be passions, capacities or state of character.

We are not called good or bad on the ground of our passions but are so called on the basis of our virtues and vices. The “moral virtues and vices” make up character and character is produced by habituation i.e. repeated doing of acts which have similar or common quality. Such repetitions acting upon natural aptitudes or prosperities gradually fixes them in one or the other of two opposite directions, giving them a bias towards good or evil. So, the core issue for Aristotle is the role of habits in personality. He emphasizes the role of habits in conduct in his books “Nicomachean Ethics”. Aristotle attributes some key thesis of ethical questions to Socrates. The ethical questions discussed by Socrates and Plato concern how one should live, what the virtues are, whether they can be taught and why they are worth choosing. “The unexamined life is not worth living” declares Socrates in his apology. Much of Aristotle’s philosophy is a reflection on and a response to writings by his predecessors and then he was keen to distance himself from their views but on major ethical questions Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are in agreement. All three agree that a rationale choice of life will be one directed to one’s own happiness.

According to Aristotle, rational activity should be in accordance with virtue and he defines happiness as outstanding rational activity. Aristotle insists that habituation; not teaching is the route to moral virtue. We must practice doing good actions, not just read about virtue. Aristotle thought that moral virtue is a sort of mean. Aristotle focuses on practical matters and according to his initial statement, ethics is a branch of politics and he asks how morally good behavior and the moral virtues that prompt it can be developed. Besides the proper upbringing by parents, good laws are essential for a number of reasons. Laws ordain certain aspects of child-rearing, they set standard for good behavior and people respond better when laws, rather than despots, seek to impose standards. Aristotle concludes that virtue involves the choice between two extremes- the vice of excess and the vice of deficiency. A virtuous act is one that occurs at the median between the two vices. It is a characteristic that consists in observing the mean relative to us; a mean which is defined by a rational principle, such as a man of practical wisdom (right reason) would use to determine it.

Adam Smith transformed or thinking about principles of economic life from an ancient to modern form based on a completely new understanding of how human society works. Dr. Eamonn Butler<sup>1</sup> writes in this book<sup>2</sup> that according to Smith Prudence, justice and beneficence are important. The ideal must be, however, that any impartial person, real or imaginary – what Smith calls an impartial spectator – would fully empathize with our emotions and actions. That requires self-command and in this lays true virtue. Smith\* believes that it is something natural, built into us as social beings. We each feel sympathy (or empathy) with others which is immediate, genuine, benevolent and natural. In our imagination, we see ourselves in the position of others. If we see someone about to be struck, we wince; when we gaze at a performer on a slack rope, we writhe along with them. And when we see people happy or sad, we feel happy or sad too. Similarly, we empathize when we see people acting in ways we approve of. In fact, we feel genuine pleasure from sharing in the emotions and opinions of others. And when we do not share the emotions of others, or disapprove of their actions, it is mutually distressing. It is, however, not so much the emotion itself that we empathize with, says Smith, but the situation that gave rise to it. When we see an angry person, we are more likely to fear for the potential victims of this anger than to share in it; at least until we have learnt the facts of the case and have made our own judgment as to how far the anger is justified. If we feel that people have overreacted to some incident, they lose our empathy.

Eighteenth century philosophers believe that there must be sounder foundation for society than the dogma handed down by the clerics or the imperatives issued by the political authorities. Some struggled to find ‘rational’ systems of law and ethics. But Smith argued that human society – including science, language, the arts and commerce – was rooted deeply in human nature. He showed how our natural instincts are a better guide than any over touting reason. If we simply remove ‘all systems either of preference or of restraint’ and rely on ‘natural liberty’, we will find ourselves settling, unintentionally but surely, into a harmonious, peaceful and efficient social order. This liberal social order does not require the constant attention of kings and ministers to conserve it. But it does rely on human beings observing certain rules of interpersonal conduct – such as justice and respect for other people’s lives and property. The beneficial overall social order then emerges quite naturally. Smith’s quest was to identify the natural principles of human behavior that in fact create this fortunate result.

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2-Adam Smith – a Primer by Eamonn Butler 2007

## **Modern World and Ethics**

G.E. Moore (1903) writes that it appears that in ethics, the difficulties and agreements, of which history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer.

“Integration of Ethics into business” is the main topic of ethics in today’s world. Today’s world is a world of economics as economics becomes the most powerful sector of human life. World economy derives its strength from business activities. There should be linkage between ethics and Business or not? Different economists look into this question in different ways. Milton Friedman (1962) believed “There is one and only one social responsibility of business- to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits”. He also gave arguments in favor of his beliefs that “business of business is business”. The sole responsibility of an organization is its shareholders, providing profits for them. He acknowledged legal and ethical constraints on business activity, emphasizing that the organization should not harm society, but he denied that it should assume any wider social responsibility for its maintenance and improvement. According to Friedman, in a free enterprise, a corporate executive is an employee of the owners of the business and he has direct responsibility to employers. That responsibility is to conduct business in accordance with the desires of employers, which will be to make as much money as possible while confirming to the basic rules of society, both embodied in law and those embodied in ethical customs. Friedman was of opinion that if we need corporate executive to be socially responsible then he has to act in some way which would not in the interest of employer. Friedman gave this as a basic reason of socially responsible to be a socialist doctrine in which political mechanism are the appropriate way to determine the allocation of scarce resources to alternative users instead of market mechanism.

Milton Friedman's view about social responsibility of business is a major contentious in modern business world. Majority of people do not believe in this thought. In his article Milton Friedman emphasized on making profits as the ultimate duty of business. No one disagrees with him but not at the cost of society. As per his opinion, corporate executive is the employee of the owners of business and he has direct responsibility to employees only. Friedman forgot that corporate executive is also the responsible citizen of this world and he has direct responsibility to society also. He should take actions which should not harm society and he has some social responsibility also. His decisions should be judged economically and socially. There should be no contradictions when we consider his decisions economically and also socially. If we consider corporate executive as the representative of society, then his business should not harm society and his business should also be socially responsible. A corporate executive or his business cannot deny this reality that they are responsible to society also. A business cannot be social irresponsible despite its ultimate aim to make profits.

## **Objectivism**

Ayn Rand (1943) described objectivism as “the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of life, with moral productive achievement as his noblest activity and reason as his only absolute”. Her strategy is to make fundamental the role of reason in human life. She said that ethics is based on requirements of life, that which makes life possible with the standards of goals, that which undermines or destroys life. The values needed for life are not automatically achieved, and since they are not automatically achieved, each human faces a fundamental alternative: to achieve the values necessary for life or not. Rand argues that individuals are born cognitively and emotionally, that reason is primary in shaping one’s values and those emotions are consequences of one’s value choices. This means that one is not born with destructive values and it is possible to shape one’s value system and character. Ethics is about self development rather than self restraint. All modern ethical theories are based on doing what is right or wrong for a good society. These ethical theories include stakeholder theory, universal rights based on human rights, sustainable development, environment and common good approach (Garriga and Mele, 2004).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The definition of right and wrong or good and bad varies according to the beliefs of different people and there are numerous theories relating to definition of ethics. These are some of the points we define from above discussion.

- Nothing is right or wrong in itself
- Anything becomes right or good if society accepts it as a right and vice versa

- The principles of ethics are not universal but change with the time and societies and laws of ethics are applicable only within its environment and society
- Good works are those
  - Which give internal pleasure to people doing it
  - Which are beneficial and good for a number of people in a the society
  - Which adds to the welfare of all human beings of the society

There is no universal definition of “Absolute Good” and “Welfare of Society”. Every philosopher has its own definition as per his thoughts. Actions are called good or bad on the basis of their results. They are neither good nor bad in themselves. As the environment changes, the philosophy of ethics should be changed. We should decide at the time of decision about the consequences of that decision for the human beings and the society.

### **Ethics as Success**

Can we say that ethics means success? This is called expediency and expediency is the centre of human mind. There is another approach of human mind which is called “the ethical theory of Intuitionism”. According to intuitionism, the actions are not called good or bad based on their results but they are intrinsically right or wrong. Wrong actions are wrong even if the society gets huge benefits from it. These actions are “A priori” and truth can be known without inference. Truth is good even if there is no evidence for it and even if a single person in the world does not accept it. But how do we know that any action is good in itself or not. Two thoughts exist to answer this question. One approach is called subjectivist and the other is called objectivist. Objectivism means that there is something inside us which tells us that this action is good or not and that thing is called the moral sense of conscience. That’s why if something comes in front of us then we should ask our heart about it. If the conscience approves it then it would become right or good and vice versa. The opposite of this approach say that conscience is not a permanent standard to decide about anything. That’s why the decision to decide about anything should be based on reasoning. So, we have some questions in front of us.

- 1) Is there something inside us with the name of conscience and it has ability to say right to a right and wrong to a wrong thing?
- 2) Do wits have the ability to say right to right and wrong to a wrong action or thing?
- 3) Neither conscience nor wits have the ability to judge between right and wrong but the right or wrong are intrinsically right or wrong
- 4) If option (3) is right then who will decide that what is intrinsically wrong and right

### **Absolute Standard**

We see that the conscience of different people gives different decisions for them and there is no absolute standard for a voice on conscience. Voice of conscience is only applicable to a particular person and it cannot become authority for the others. It means that there is no absolute conscience. Now we have to see whether reason can become the standard of right or wrong. Most of the scientists and the ethicists believe that in the world of ethics, rationalization is the captain of the ship. All the actions are categorized as good or bad on the basis of outcomes and outcomes are judged on the basis of rationalization.

### **Rationalization**

The question is “what rationalization is?” if you go to your friend’s house and see an antique painting in his house which takes all your attention. You want to have this painting at any cost. Inspiration of painting and to have this painting all belongs to your feelings or emotions and there is no reasoning why you like this painting. The liking of this painting is related to your heart and world of heart is different from rationalization. Then you think about how to get this painting and here starts your world of rationalization. Now rationalization gives different suggestions to have this painting like to ask your friend to sell this painting to you, or to steal this painting, how to steal, what will be the consequences of that etc. Now you look at each option and think about its results. This is all rationalization. So, the work of rationalization is to provide a ground for your feelings or emotions and to provide different reasoning for your emotions like the owner of painting does not know the value of this painting, all the paintings are similar in his eyes, I know the true value of the work by painter etc. All this reasoning is provided by rationalization but why is this reasoning? It’s only because your heart have to have this painting.

This shows that sometimes, to support emotions or feelings, rationalization deceives the person himself. Rationalization shows that the decision is right and the person does not know that his emotions are wrong. C.M. Joad (1907) wrote that rationalization is a power which deceives us and gives reasons for our liking or emotions. Freed (1948) studied different criminals and reached to a conclusion that the criminals have formed various thoughts which provide reasoning for their crimes and that's why these criminals do not consider their crimes as wrong actions. Freed reached a conclusion that rationalization or wits provide reasoning for our emotions also. Emotions are instincts and the basic instinct is the "preservation of self". Whether is the basis of our actions (either on rationalization or on emotions), aim is the same and that is the preservation of self. We can say that any action which seems to be based on rationalization or on emotions is in fact based on instinct of preservation of self. Ethics demand sacrifice and wits demands preservation of self. It is the duty of wits and is not a negative thing if we look at it from another angle. If you take wits to the ground of ethics and if anything strikes to its basic duty then it will try to distract it from its path.

Kant (1788) gives rationalization as the basis of ethics and considers rationalization as a practical reasoning. As per Kant's philosophy, the actions should not be judged on their results and the empirical experiences are not the basis for good and bad actions. As per his ideology, good is only "Good Will". Kant says that man act as per "conceptions of laws" and therefore "will" is another name of "practical reasoning". Kant defines good will as any "will" which does any work by considering his duty. He believes that any action which involves even a thinking or hope of any reward does not remain good, no matter how it is good in itself. If we explain idea of Kant in brief, we have following four points.

- Good is based on good will
- Man should act according to the principles which are applicable to all human beings
- According to these principles actions should not be done for any reward but should be done considering as a duty
- These principles are derived by rationalization which does not involve emotions and this is called "laws of Freedom"

The fourth point is not clear that from where we will derive these principles which we call as "Absolute Good". Kant (1788) says that we will have these principles from wits which have no influence of emotions but we had already seen that it is impossible for wits not to be influenced by emotions.

### **Moral Values as Absolute Values**

In ethics the basic question is of moral values. There are relative values and instrumental values but from the "Objective Intuitionism" point of view there are real, permanent and absolute values. Hastings Rushdall (1907) said that there is one absolute standard of values which is the same for all rational beings is just what morality means. Rushdall says that to know these values is not possible without having the true knowledge of reality. So, in ethics to know reality is the fundamental thing. Rushdall says that we have to accept that this universe is not created without any purpose but the purpose of its creations is to provide a ground with which human soul achieve its objective. Soul is an immortal thing and the effects of human body do not affect soul. He says that this world would finish without any judgment day then we do not need any ethics. We do good actions because we believe we will have reward of this good at the time of judgment and the question will be asked about this. Deviating from God's will is unacceptable for those who make their foundation of ethics on religion. According to religious believers, ethics is continually instructed, natured and nurtured by the Word of God which is not the case of atheists. They believe that this makes a huge difference in terms of ethics and morality.

### **Ethics without Religion**

Evangelists claim that atheists have no basis for morality and no foundations for ethics. They claim that without a supernatural basis for morality, all morality must be relative and 'all is permissible'. They have an opinion that those who believe in God are more ethical than non believers. In their opinion, believers are superior to non believers as they have strong foundations for morality. Atheists have an opinion that morality has nothing to do with God. Then what would be the basis of morality for atheists? Many theists also believe that atheists can profound ethical statements and live good moral lives. There is enough to refute the claim that atheists are immoral. Hitchens (2007) said "name one ethical statement made, or one ethical action performed, by a believer that that is not done by a non believer".

Daniel Dennett (2006) adds “I have uncovered no evidence to support the claim that people, whether religious or not, who don’t reward in heaven and punishment in hell are more likely to kill, rape, robe or break promises than people who do”. As we have discussed earlier that in opinion of theists, absolute values are derived from religion and we do good things to get reward at the time of judgment day. But atheists believe that moral or absolute values are either personal or cultural and it is not related to God or reward. The moral relativist affirms that morality is an individual matter and every person decides it for him or herself that what is wrong or right. Atheists can be moral but is it possible for them to deviate from morality? If theist deviate from morality then religion castigate him as per his or her beliefs about religion but there is no castigation for atheists. There is also no benchmark of ethics available for atheists and they are answerable to themselves only. Atheists claim that religious ethics comes down to obedience to divine authority but morality is not the same as obedience. Atheists define ethics as “the rules, principles or policies with the goal of something in this world”. They have the objective experience of living this world that is in front of them.

Atheists describe health (opposite of death) as survival ability that implies other derivative values. The ethics of health imply the goal of sustainable civilization as they believe in no life after death. They consider human beings as social animals and health implies peace as a basic value. Their ethics should promote the peace of communities. James Rachels (2003) write “the key idea of social contract approach to ethics is that morally binding rules are the ones that are necessary for social living. It is obvious that we cannot live together very well if we did not accept rules prohibiting murder, assault, theft, lying, breaking promises and so on. These rules are justified by showing that they are necessary if we are to cooperate for our mutual benefits”. Atheists define social contract morality as the ethics of peace. If we briefly discuss ethics in eyes of atheists, we can say that for them moral and absolute values are health and peace in the world and their derivation is not from the religion. They have as strong and sound a sense of right and wrong as anyone and are directed towards humanity.

### **Final Conclusion**

We have discussed the evolution of ethics from pre-modern time to modern time. Different theories describing ethics and the basis of ethics have been discussed in the article. We got two major foundations of ethics: one which derives its roots from religion and the other which does not believe in religion. Whatever is the foundation, they converge to moral values that are directed towards doing something good for society and humanity.

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