

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF HISTORY OF ETHICS

**(Summarized from Short History of Ethics by Rogers, R.A.P., Mac
Millan Books First 1911, ed. 1937 Edinburgh)
SHORT HISTORY OF ETHICS**

The known history of pure ethics or ethics (moral) theories begin with ancient Greek philosophers (Sophists, Socrates, Socratic schools, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Stoics) and after recovered by early English positivists has been the main topic of discussions in the Medieval times in Europe. As the scholastic doctrines are by-passed (therefore Christian Ethics is not a scientific term anymore), we come to the illuminated times after the Medieval, and continue with Hobbes, the Father of Modern Ethics.

This type of ethics is known by two logical methods; **criticism and comparison**.

After Hobbes, English and German schools of ethics have been differentiated. These led to English Intuitionists (naturalists) followed by **Utilitarians** against **Kantian ethics**.

Throughout 19th Century these ideas have been discussed very fiercely throughout Europe. Then Comte, Darwin, and finally Spencer followed by Green came in, who set the evolution concept into physical sciences as well as the development of ethics. So at the beginning of 20th century Ethics was more with evolutionary concepts but still divided between Utilitarians and Kantians (Kant's Categorical Imperative).

- **WHAT IS ETHICS?**

Ethics deals with human well-being, and discusses;

- The nature of “individual” good
- The nature of “social” good
- The relation between these
- The ethical motives that exist for the individual to pursue “social good”, or to whatever is “morally right”
- The relation between “pleasure” and “good”
- The nature of “virtue” (in antique ethics)
- Duty and moral obligation (in modern ethics)
- The freedom of the will
- The ethical worth of “Positive Morality”

The following questions will serve to dig into the nature of the problems which Ethics attempts to solve:

- Is “happiness” the “ultimate end” of actions?
- Is “virtue” preferable to “pleasure”?
- How do “pleasure” and “happiness” differ?
- What is meant by saying that “I ought to perform some particular action or respect some general precept such as the keeping of promises”?
- Am I under any obligation to seek the welfare of other persons, as well as my own?
- If so, what is the right proportion between the two welfares?
- What is meant by “freedom of the will”?
- Is feeling or reason the right guide to conduct?
- What do the terms “good”, “right”, obligation”, “duty”, “conscience” signify, both practically or theoretically?

These problems and similar others associated with them form the subject matter of Ethics, which may be described as the “**science which investigates the general principles for determining the true worth of the ultimate ends of human conduct”.**

These principles, if they could be discovered and exactly formulated, so that the rules of this conduct could be deduced from them, would constitute Ideal Morality. Practical Morality, on the other hand, is the body of laws (the ethical code) accepted by an age or community as correct principles for determining the true worth of actions, and expressed in the form of judgments of approval or disapproval.

For example, the Positive Morality of our age approves the industry, temperance, honesty, and a regard for human life, while it condemns their opposites.

It must not be granted that Positive and Ideal Moralities coincide.

Positive Morality may change with the time and country as it reflects cultures, conventions and customs.

Remember that slavery, polygamy, witch-burning, torture, tipping,... were once legal and acceptable.

Ultimate Ends:

This is the most important definition of Pure (Theoretical) Ethics. It is defined as the end of a deliberate action for the sake of which it is performed. Some ends are pursued chiefly, as a means of realization of other ends. An ultimate end, however, is one that is desired for its own sake, quite apart from its utility in helping towards the attainment of other ends.

Ethics deal with ultimate ends of human conduct. And values them with the criteria commonly accepted as “ethical”.

Therefore, we need a **good list of the values**, methods of evaluation and use a set of “**canons**” or laws for sound decisions. This separates it from all other sciences.

This is the main problem of Ethics; “are the satisfaction of these interests and the attainment of these desired objects, good in themselves?”

- It is not possible for an individual to satisfy all his interests therefore use some principle of ethical selection, according to which some interests are to be preferred to others.
- Some interests, if allowed to draw attention beyond a limit are destructive of their own satisfactions, and interfere with the satisfaction of other interests.
- The interest of one person often conflict with those of others and Ethics has to try to find a practical harmony between the interests of the different members of society.

and (2) lead to individual ethics, (3) leads to social ethics.

- Ethics seeks for a principle that will determine the true worth of the ends of conduct, to see if the true worth is said to be “good”.
- What is “good”? What is “morally good”? These questions require a scientific definition. What is consciously approved by a person for its own sake is “good”. Satisfaction of “interest” is “good”. Pleasurable feeling is “good”.
- In comparing one limited “good” with another, we may have to consider the quality, duration, and intensity of the satisfaction yielded by each, as well as the tendency which each may have to help or hinder the attainment of other goods by the agent or by other persons. In this way “immediate” and “remote” goods are defined:
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 - **Immediate good** is the momentary satisfaction by a single person
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 - **Remote good** is the satisfaction which is not confined to the present moment or to only one person.
- A social remote good and a remote good in distant timeframe are realized in both instant time and in the individuals’ experiences.

MORAL OBLIGATION, DUTY AND FREE WILL

When we say that a person “ought” to obey a law (obligation), it is equivalent to saying his “duty” to do so. In other words it is the preference of a higher good to a lower good.

Elementary “freedom of the will“ is the power by human beings of subordinating impulses and lower goods to higher goods.

VIRTUE/VICE

- Virtue is a property of character, though indirectly applied to actions or motives. A morally virtuous man, is one who respects the moral codes enjoining Industry, Temperance, Honor, Justice, Charity, Mercy,... Vice is the opposite of virtue.
- It is a habitual tendency to pursue always the best attainable ends. Virtue has wider meaning than moral virtue. The difference is special virtue (like skill in music, mechanics, oratory,..) which may interfere with higher virtues. Excellence in a profession by this virtue is, however, a higher virtue. All moral virtues are on the same level; the highest. Natural or special virtues are not attainable by everyone; thus community does

WELL-BEING, HAPPINESS AND PLEASURE

- Well-being signifies the permanent realization of good by an individual. Ancient Greek philosophers and schools of thought had all differing views of well-being and its definition. Aristotle, however, puts it that “an individual cannot regard his own well-being apart from others” which is still one of the best corollaries of the well-being in our day.

HISTORY OF ETHICS, MAIN PHILOSOPHERS AND THE SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Antiquities or the Ancient Greek Era

- Started by the SOPHISTS who studied the human conduct for the first time:
- Positive side: **PROTOGORAS** (of Abdera, 480 B.C.): Good is subjective;
MAN IS THE MEASURE OF ALL THINGS

(therefore all practical philosophy is personal in a positive way that the idea of good in individual's mind create moral codes for the social group)

- Negative side: **GORGIAS** (of Leontini, 483 B.C.): (as the good and truth are subjective in the man's mind there are only particular feelings of limited subjective nature, **THE GOOD OF ANOTHER CANNOT BE AN END OF ACTION TO ME** (Scepticism-Egoism))
- Then came the philosophers who took the individual as the main subject of ethical conduct:

SOCRATES

(Athens, 469-399 B.C.): he was against SOPHISTS LIKE Gorgias and their egoism,
SOCRATES IS the founder of Science of Ethics:

- VIRTUE IS KNOWLEDGE (it may be thought and learned);
- HE WHO KNOWS MUST ACT ACCORDINGLY;
- NO ONE VOLUNTARILY FOLLOWS EVIL;
- VICE CAN ONLY BE BECAUSE OF IGNORANCE;
- ONLY BY SELF-KNOWLEDGE CAN FREEDOM BE ACQUIRED;
- LEARN YOUR PASSIONS WITHIN YOUR OWN SOUL AND CONTROL THEM TO REACH WISDOM)

- **Cynics**

- ANTISTHENES

- Highest end of life is VIRTUE
- PAIN is good to reach VIRTUE

- students of Socrates,
- Socratic schools of thought

- **Cyrenaics**

- ARISTIPPUS

The only concrete good is
IMMEDIATE PLEASURE
SO A WISE MAN TRIES TO GET
MOST OUT OF LIFE

PLATO (427-347 B.C.)

Students of Socrates, Socratic schools of thought

Defined the social good and individual good and their relationships (Famous book of Republic)

- THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES BELONGING TO THE “STATE”; WISDOM, FORTITUDE or COURAGE, TEMPERANCE, JUSTICE
- JUSTICE IS THE HIGHEST VIRTUE AND IT INCLUDES ALL OTHERS. IT REQUIRES INDIVIDUALITY, TOO. EVERY MEMBER OF THE STATE SHOULD BE ‘JUST’.
- SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL GOODS ARE DEFINED.
- IDEAL RULERS ARE DESCRIBED FOR AN IDEAL STATE; HE SHOULD BE A PHILOSOPHER, A LOVER OF WISDOM, COMBINING INTELLECTUAL INSIGHT WITH PRACTICAL INTELLIGENCE. THEY SHOULD BE EDUCATED FOR LITERATURE, ART, GYMNASTIC, MATHEMATICS (so that he will know how to generalize and find the accuracy in details), AND TESTED FOR FORTITUDE. CHIEF RULERS MUST BE CHOSEN FROM THOSE WHO ARE BEST QUALIFIED IN DIALECTICS (WISDOM).
- HIGHEST GOOD: ABSOLUTE GOOD IN THE FORM OF IDEAS, IDEALS AND REASON IN THE UNIVERSE.
- HE DEFINED MORTAL BODY AND IMMORTAL SOUL
- HE DEFINES THE GOOD MAN IN WHOM KNOWLEDGE, EMOTION AND DESIRE WORK IN PERFECT HARMONY, NO PART OF THE SOUL TYRANNISING OVER THE REST, EACH PART EXERCISING ITS DUE ACTIVITY.

ARISTOTLE

(384-322, Stagira, Thrace) (the separation of the sciences)

- HE DEFINES “POLITICAL SCIENCE” AS THE HIGHEST OF ALL SCIENCES, AS EVERYTHING ELSE AIMS AT THE “GOOD” OF THE STATE.
- SOCIAL GOOD IS ABOVE THE INDIVIDUAL GOOD, ONLY IN SO FAR AS INDIVIDUALS MAKE UP A SOCIETY AND THEIR ACTIONS ATTAIN THE GOOD OF THE SOCIETY, IT IS THE SUBJECT OF POLITICAL SCIENCES (SCIENCE OF ETHICS).
- DEFINES WELL BEING AS THE ACTIVITY OF THE SOUL IN ACCORDANCE WITH VIRTUE DURING THE PERIOD OF A COMPLETE LIFE.
- **THE DEFINITION OF THE TRUTH**
- **DOCTRINE OF MEAN: EVERY KIND OF EXCELLENCE (=VIRTUE) IS A MEAN BETWEEN TWO EXTREME, ONE AN EXCESS AND THE OTHER A DEFECT.**
- Epicurus (Hedonism arose first by Cyrenaics and sympathized by Romans, psychological Hedonism)
- PLEASURE IS THE PRIMARY AND NATURAL END AT WHICH EVERY SENSIBLE BEING AIMS, THERE IS NO OTHER GOOD. WE USE ONLY OUR SENSES TO DECIDE WHAT IS GOOD FOR A LIFETIME.
- THE STOICS (mainly a Latin school following the Epicurian teachings, with the main difference of having REASON instead of FEELINGS, DIVINE SPIRIT; SOME THEISTS AND MATERIALISTS)
(founded by Zeno, and followed by Seneca, 340-265 B.C., Epictetus, A.D. first century)
- 1. WELL-BEING IS ACTING RATIONALLY, OR IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE NATURE OF THE MAN; A NATURE PARTLY SELF-DETERMINED, PARTLY DETERMINED BY THE ETERNAL LAWS OF THE UNIVERSE, AND THOSE LAWS ARE THE EXPRESSIONS OF REASON, ARE THUS IN CONFORMITY WITH MAN’S SELF-DETERMINING NATURE.
- 2. RATIONAL ACTION AND MORALLY VIRTUOUS ACTION ARE THE SAME.
- 3. FROM SOCIAL POINT OF VIEW THERE RESULTS AN EXTENSION OF THE AREAS OF DUTIES TO ALL BEINGS POSSESSING REASON, THAT IS, TO THE WHOLE OF HUMANITY.

YEAR 0 (A.D.) (BEGINNING OF MODERN ETHICS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF STRONGER MORAL AND SPIRITUAL FORCES OF CHRISTIANITY)

MEDIEVAL ERA (NEOPLATONISTS, SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA, ETC.)

MAINLY TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

NATURALISM

Ethical ideas arise from natural laws

INTUITIONISM

Ethical ideas and obligations are intuitive

Bacon's Novum Organum (1620)

- Descartes (1596-1650): **TRUTH IS WHAT CAN BE PREHENDED BY MAN**
- Spinoza (1632-1677): **TRUTH IS ITS OWN CRITERION**

HOBBS

(The founder of modern Ethics, an Egoistic Naturalist)
(1588-1679)

- Hobbes defines Philosophy as the knowledge of effects by means of the concepts of their causes. By this he identifies it with Deductive Science based on observation and reason. For reason, Logic is important to seek the cause-to-effect pathways.
- Hobbes' doctrine is Exclusive Egoism (Ego being the "soul"). All men, he says, are equal by nature; they possess equal powers of self-defense and similar tastes. Except for specially surprised condition, men are in war with men (**MAN IS THE WOLF OF MAN**). In this state of mind nothing is right or wrong. Force and fraud are in war with the two cardinal virtues. But when they become rational, then peace comes. Without social harmony happiness is impossible.
- Therefore seek the peace and follow it, for if we cannot get it we are to defend ourselves at all costs. To attain peace men will use that much liberty to allow a similar liberty for other men.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is the most important name in modern ethics. He is a follower of both the Intuitionists and Naturalists. He underlines the importance of “duty” and “self-love” as two distinct motives.
- He says that the only absolutely good thing is the “good will”. It is the principle of action that ought to be obeyed by all rational beings, under all circumstances and for its own sake. This principle of action is adopted by the person, and not the laws which are independent of the person. Kantian “Categorical Imperative” suggests that “A person should act on that principles, and when everybody act like that principles become a universal law”.

Kant's definition of "**Free-will**" is based on the consciousness of moral obligations: "**we ought, therefore we can**"

Kant based his theory on three postulates of morality.

- The Existence of God
- The freedom of will
- The Immortality of the Soul.

The particular duties as well as the general principles of morality can never be doubtful as they are known by rational intuition: he ascertains that,

- We can do what we ought to do, but unless we know what we ought to do we cannot do it.
- A conflict of duties is impossible.
- Motive determines the morality of the actions; not the effects.
- Kant's most important teaching is "**morality of an action depends only on the motive, and is independent of the effects on the person doing it or on the others**".

UTILITARIANISM

- Utilitarianism is the doctrine that the ethical standard should be “great happiness” of the greatest number (of people). Its founder is Bentham (1748-1832) who was followed with Stuart Mill and Sidgwick.
- Bentham says that “Nature has placed man under the governance of two masters, **pain and pleasure**. It is for them to tell us what we ought to do, therefore, we shall do.
- Then the **principle of utility** comes into picture; to approve or disapprove every action with a value in itself to increase or decrease the happiness of the party (community) whose interest (sum of interests of members of the community) is in question.
- What is the measure of pleasure and pain? For the personal pleasure; (1) intensity, (2) duration, (3) certainty, (4) propinquity, (5) tendency to be followed by other pleasures, (6) purity (freedom from pain) are the criteria for the measure. For the community it follows; (7) the extent (the number of persons to share the pleasure).

The seventh measure was brought to define the “equity” by Bentham. In his words “every one is to count for one, and no more for more than one”.

In conclusion,

- Pure ethical concepts cannot be used unless they are applied to real-life problems. Applied Ethics deals with more concrete subjects, like the Family, Profession, State/ Politics. Therefore applied Ethics cannot altogether be regarded a distinct science. It is rather the application of Science, Art, and the other results of human experience intelligently, in accordance with the ethical ideal that is adopted. **Very few general ethical principles can be used with precision in real life as they cannot take into account the particular conditions; consequently there is often uncertainty about the answers to moral problems until we come to particular cases.** Although in many cases the borderline between Applied and Pure Ethics is not always visible.
- However, for securing the “**social good**”, how should the special interests of individuals be regulated? This is the fundamental problem of Applied Ethics. In general, the individual has to use his own judgment, to construct his own system of Applied Ethics. Conscientiousness, the permanent will to act in the spirit of the objective ideal in which he believes, is indispensable, but it may mislead, unless guided by reflecting intelligence. The knowledge of pure ethical theory and a brief history of it help arousing this reflection in practical life.
- Science and Research Ethics and Engineering Ethics are parts of the Applied Ethics to be studied.