

Ethics
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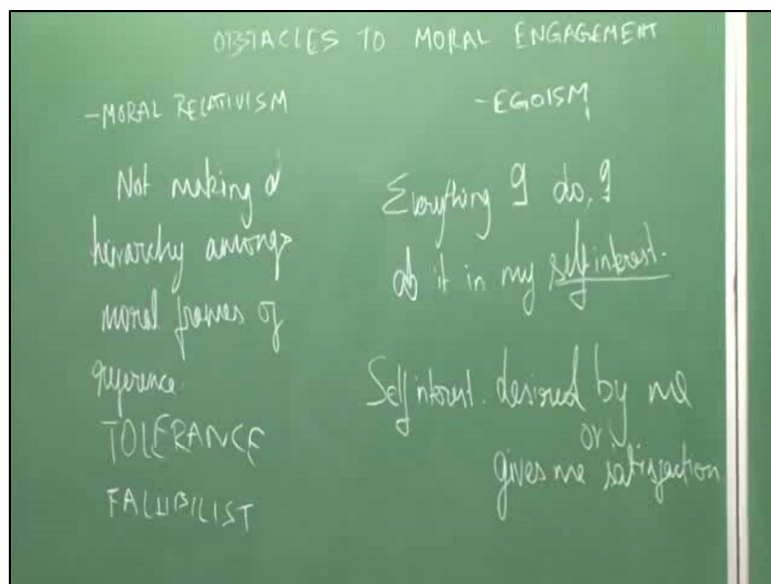
Module No. #01

Lecture No. #02

Introduction to Ethics – An assessment of Ethical Relativism

And now, we are going to talk about, what are the obstacles to, moral engagement. We have seen, laid the foundations of our enterprise with, in the moral domain. Now, we are trying to find out, that what, before we begin full swing, that what are the objections or obstacles, that one faces, before a moral engagement. Now, the first obstacle that we face is, Moral Relativism. As written on the board, there are two basic obstacles, or most common obstacles, to moral engagement, which are moral Relativism, and Egoism.

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Now, let me briefly tell you, what is a Moral Relativism. The Moral Relativism is exemplified, by the frequently quoted adage, that you come across, that is your life and your values, and this is my life and my values. And therefore, I will not sit on judgement upon your values, and you cannot sit on judgement upon my values. Now, that our moral frames of reference, are difference. And, there can be no hierarchy among these, moral frames of reference, or moral points of origin. Right.

That, you come from a different culture, and I come from a different culture. And therefore, we both cannot. There is no basis for us, to have a dialogue. Now, this is quite a prevalent attitude, which is exemplified again, by the claims that well, I am not judgemental, not being

judgemental. So, not making moral judgements, upon another culture, or another individual, or another domain.

So, let me briefly put it as, that Moral Relativism is talking about, not making a hierarchy between, frames of Moral Reference. Now, when I say that, we do not make a hierarchy, amongst the moral frame of reference. What I am saying is that well, one moral domain cannot sit in judgement, of another moral domain. So, this comes out to mean that, this is your life, and you decide, what you do. This is my life, and I decide, what to do.

Now, this is quite common attitude, that we see. Does it actually stand for Relativism? Now, let us see. Now, if I were a Relativist, a Moral Relativist, or an Ethical Relativist, I would not be able to sit on judgement, on your moral actions. And likewise, you would not be able to sit on my judgement, on my moral actions. But now, is that really the case, that we do not judge each other. Or, is there something more to it.

Now this, we would all like to call ourselves, a Relativist. In this, shows an attitude of humility about knowledge and openness, and being non dogmatic about value claims. But well, let us see. Let us see, what do we mean by, Moral Relativist claim. Now, the Relativist claim is that well, I cannot judge your actions. That means, whatever you do, is beyond my judgement.

But, do we actually mean by that, by when we say, that we are not judgemental that. Or, do we mean something called, Tolerance. That is, we see, when I claim that, I am not sitting in judgement over your actions. Do I perhaps actually mean that, I am tolerant of your value system. If I were a Relativist, then no matter what you do. Say, an individual is mercilessly quashing a little puppy, on the main road.

A Relativist well, would say that, that is his decision, and that is his values, which he is executing. A person with tolerance, would make a judgement, would say that well, it is wrong for that person, to trouble the puppy this way. And perhaps, when the threshold of tolerance breaks, and he sees that the puppy is being tortured too much, and that too in unprovoked stimuli. Then, he would perhaps step in, and stop the chap, from torturing the puppy.

Now, the second is an example of somebody, who exhibits Tolerance. Although, we would

commonly believe that, the second is also an example of Relativism. It is not an example of Relativism. Now, the opposite of Relativism is Absolutism, or being a Fundamentalist about values. Now, the moment we say, a Fundamentalist about Values, or Connotations, or of somebody who is Dogmatic, Rigid, Unkind, and perhaps a Wicked or Evil, maybe even a Terrorist.

But, that is just a connotation of Fundamentalist. The denotation of Fundamentalist, or an Absolutist is that, one who is open, that there can be some transcultural values. That, even Mahatma Gandhi is a Fundamentalist, for that reason. Because, if he holds that non-violence is a transcultural value, no matter what, then Mahatma Gandhi is an Absolutist. The Amnesty International, which works for Human Rights world over, is a Fundamentalist Organisation.

Because, it believes, human rights are applicable, all over the world, to all peoples, at all times. The universal declaration of human rights is again, a Fundamentalist Absolutist claim. So, we would see, a Moral Relativist on the other hand, cannot make any judgements at all. So, even the act of in a culture, where new born babies are mercilessly slaughtered, because of their gender, can also, not be judged by the Moral Relativist.

So, coming to the Absolutist. Now, we see, the Absolutist actually does have, some stands. The Moral Relativist can have, no stand. So, the first obstacle that we face, to the moral engagement, is Moral Relativist. Now, somebody who calls himself Relativist, cannot have a dialogue about morality. Because, for him, simply that, just as apples and oranges cannot be compared, unless until, you have a common domain of fruits.

So, you cannot compare different value systems. Because, each value system belongs to each domain, it comes from. There is nothing to converse about. Because, there is no common truth, or no common ground, to arrive at. Now, let us reconsider ourselves. Are we people, who are tolerant. Or, are we Relativist. Perhaps, most of us would claim, to belong to the domain of tolerant people, rather than Relativist.

So, as we see that, Relativism gives us a hue of intellectual humility, and non-dogmatic approach. But, it is not so, actually. In fact, tolerance is what, we perhaps more accurately mean, or to target, when we say that, we are humble, or about our moral or value claims, that they are fallible. So, being fallible, is not the same thing, as being a Relativist. So, one must

clear one's theoretical standpoint that, whether one is a Fallibilist, or a Moral Relativist.

Now, who is a Fallibilist? A Fallibilist is the one, who has one's own value claims, but thinks that, it is fallible. That well, it can be wrong. But, a Relativist is different. A Relativist could think that, he is wrong, but he would find no other way of correcting himself. Because, well, there is no absolute transcultural value, to arrive at. So, if you are a Relativist, the moral engagement does not take off. As we see that, there is simply no reason for engaging morally, because there is no common ground to arrive at.

But, as we have shown that perhaps, we all sit in judgement of the other. And, we all sit in judgement of the other. And then, we refrain from taking an action to a large extent. But, we are constantly judging one another. So, this way, a Moral Relativist has no possibility of engaging in a moral discourse. Whereas, if you are open to the idea that there can be, not that there is, but that there can be one single transcultural value, you are an Absolutist.

So, as I see that Relativism, it does not hold ground. Because, we are constantly engaging in a judging, what is a better value, in refining our values. We are Fallibilist at the most, and curious at the least. But, we perhaps are not Relativist. Now, let me talk about the other dilemma, or the other obstacle, that the moral engagement precedes to. The other obstacle to moral engagement is Egoism.

Egoism is claiming that well, everything that I do, I do it in my self-interest, right. So, Ethical Egoism here, would say that. Now, is this true. Because, if everything I do, and I do it in my self-interest. That would mean, well that there is no moral domain out there, for me to discuss, to find out, to decide on the course of action. My actions are just a result of the way, I would like to act, my whims and fancies.

So, if you are an Egoist. Now, the term Egoism, you should not be confused with Egotism, or the commonly cited problem, or the eye trouble commonly cited problem, known as eye trouble, where people tend to use too much of the letter I, to denote themselves. Now, coming back to, Egoism on the other hand, is a philosophical theory, which claims that, each one of us acts, only in one's own interest.

Now, there are two versions of Egoism. They are Psychological Egoism, and Ethical Egoism.

Psychological Egoism is a descriptive theory. That is, it is describing human behaviour. And, it is claiming that well, the Psychological Egoism describes that, human beings do, what is in their self-interest. Ethical Egoist, on the other hand would say, human beings ought to do, what is in their self-interest.

So, the truth of Psychological Egoism, makes Ethical Egoism, almost an obvious truth. And, denial of Ethical Egoism, brings it the other way around. Now, let us see. If, I say that, everything I do, I do it in my self-interest. Now, if this is the claim, that an Egoist is making. I do not see any how, to engage with him, in a moral debate. Rather, I would like to ask him or her that, is there anything that you can do, which is not in your self-interest.

Now, let me bring you to the point, that what is the problem, that the Ethical Egoist suffers from. The Ethical Egoist is claiming that well, whatever I do, I do it, it is in my self-interest. So, all my targets, all my work, is for the execution of my desires. Now, I would ask the Egoist that, is there anything that he can do, which is not desired by him. Let me write it on the board, to make it clear.

Now, the problem of the Egoist is understood, by understanding the ambiguousness of the term, self-interest. If self-interest means, something that is desired by me, or that gives me satisfaction. Well, we cannot conceive of a human action, that is not in self-interest. Because, whenever we see, whatever we act on, it is definitely for one's own satisfaction. Now, if that interpretation of self-interest is broaden so much, that satisfaction also means, self-interest.

Then, there is no possible human action, which is not in self-interest. And thereby, everyone is in Egoist. And thereby, there is no possibility of doing, a non-self-interest action. But, this is where, the problem is. Now, Mother Theresa has sacrificed her, the luxuries of her life, to help the downtrodden. Now, she definitely gains satisfaction out of it. That is why, she did it. Now, could this be called, self-interest.

Because, if self-interest is to mean that well, whatever we do, that gives a satisfaction. Well, then everything that we do, is in self-interest. So, it is as calling every action, as actions of self-interest. So, here is where, the difficulty with Egoism lies. The broadness of the interpretation of the term self-interest. If everything that is done is for self-interest, then self-interest is simply incorporates, all that we do. And thereby, there is no possibility.

And, it is trivially true that, all actions are self-interested actions. But, in reality, perhaps it is not so. There is a difference between an action, which is benefiting one, and an action, which is causing harm to one, but benefiting the other. Now, both the actions might give us satisfaction. But, self-interest is served in the first, and not served in the second. So, we can see that, self-interest is only, if understood, in its sharp rigid sense, will have actions, which are not in self-interest.

But, self-interest expanded or interpreted, as any action that gives us satisfaction, then well, there are no actions, which are not out of self-interest. So, these are two most common problems or obstacles, that we face, before a moral engagement. And, in this brief few minutes, I have tried to explain that, why these two, do not stand a ground. So, with this, we would like to proceed to our next course of syllabus, which is Consequentialism. Ok.