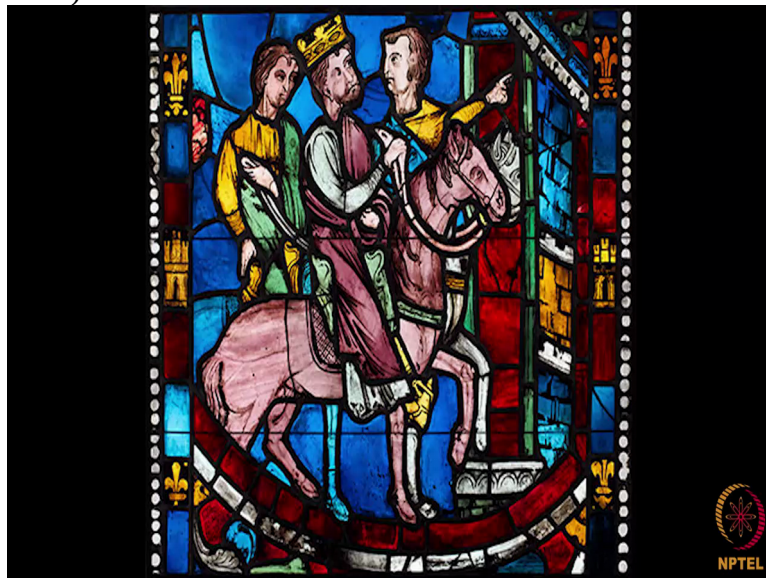


**Ethics**  
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**Indian Institute of Technology Madras**  
**Module No 1**  
**Lecture 04**  
**The Historical Perspective**

Welcome to this lecture series in ethics. This is the 4<sup>th</sup> lecture. We will discuss the historical perspective to understand the development of ethics. In the previous lecture, we have seen how the Greek civilisation has conceived ethics, the way in which virtue, the concept of virtue, the idea of moral knowledge or ethical knowledge and then also the idea of Eudaimonia or happiness is interlinked. And we will have a very brief analysis, a very brief examination of medieval moral theory and modern perspectives in this lecture which we will conclude with the analysis of with an examination of different moral theories and some challenges to morality.

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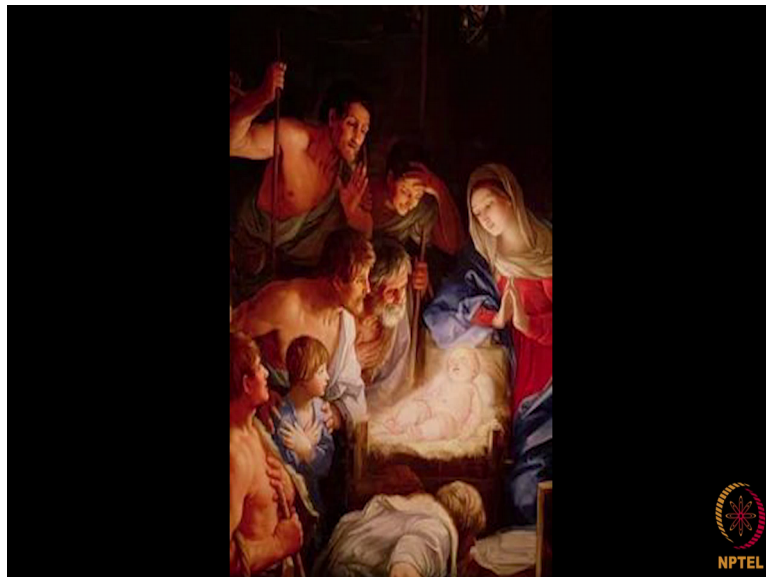
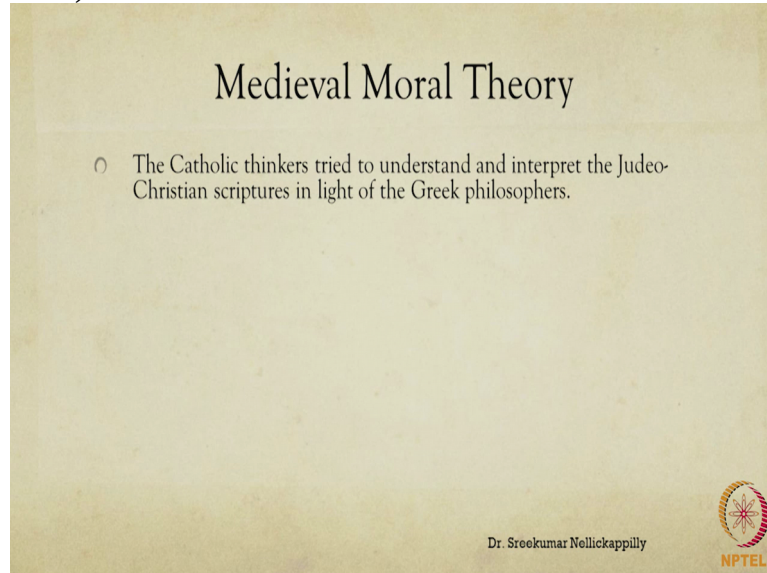


So the medieval moral theory as we have seen, I have already very briefly examined that Catholic church dominate almost all aspects of culture in Europe during the medieval period, nearly about thousand or slightly more than thousand years, this was the situation. So every aspect of life and culture was dominated by the Catholic Church. The space that was left by the Roman Empire was very successfully occupied by the Catholic Church.

So naturally, domain of morality which is very important to me as far as culture and civilisation is concerned, was also occupied by the Catholic thinkers but there was a major challenge that Catholic thinkers were facing. That is, what they had was the basis of Catholic religion was

formed by the Judaic and the Christian Scriptures, the old Testament and the new Testament. But this was not sufficient.

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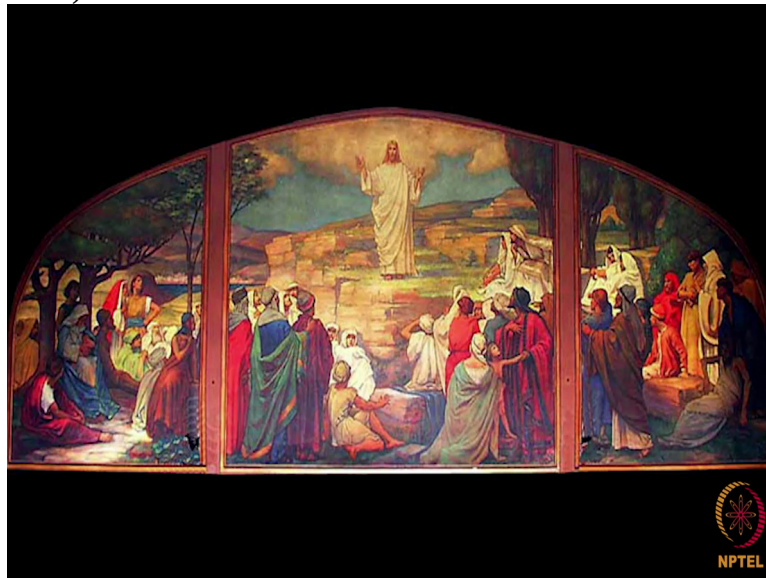


You need to justify the belief and the Christian belief system was so complex that it proposes a historical view of the divine interference in human affairs. So this divine interference of human affairs was historically presented by the Judaic Scriptures where also the idea of divine interference was presented in the new Testament as well where they have introduced the idea of a son of God coming into this world in the form of Jesus, living among human beings here and then being crucified and also resurrected.

So this entire story of Jesus has to be justified in the historical and proper context. And for that, the sense of philosophical profundity needs to be integrated into the belief system of the Christian Scriptures. So this was done by the earlier Catholic philosophers, Catholic fathers by taking help from or rather insights from the Greek philosophy, primarily the Platonic and the Aristotelian thought. So this is what they have done.



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The belief system of Christianity was justified in the light of philosophical ideas and insights developed by Plato and Aristotle. So all the major philosophers and ethicists during this period were trying to do that.

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## Medieval Moral Theory

- The Catholic thinkers tried to understand and interpret the Judeo-Christian scriptures in light of the Greek philosophers.

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## Medieval Moral Theory

- The Catholic thinkers tried to understand and interpret the Judeo-Christian scriptures in light of the Greek philosophers.
- Thomas Aquinas developed and extended Aristotle's ethical theory into a Christian context.

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So the Catholic thinkers tried to understand and interpret the Judaic-Christian Scriptures in the light of Greek philosophers and Thomas Aquinas, one among the most prominent philosophers of the scholastic period, apart from Aquinas there are many others but he was one of the most prominent, arguably the most prominent one, developed an extended Aristotle's ethical theory into the Christian context.

And Aristotle was an ideal philosopher whom they thought they can interpret, they can use to justify the Christian beliefs because in Aristotle's philosophy, unlike in Plato, Plato was an uncompromising idealist who believed, who asserted that the forms alone are real or ideas alone are real and he rejected the possibility of matter having an independent existence or reality apart from the ideas.

But in Aristotle's philosophy, we could see a compromise between form and matter, or rather the coexistence of form and matter, mutually is supplementing because forms have to be, they are in the matter, they are in the world. So this idea of inherence is present instead of transcendence which was present during Plato's philosophy. So Aquinas takes up this notion of inheritance of the ideal form in the actual word in the material world to interpret his idea of divine interference in the material world.

So it is very interesting to compare the medieval views, the scholastic perspective with the Greek perspective, particularly the perspective of the ethical, the moral perspective developed by Socrates.

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One prominent view which Socrates advocated was Socrates would often say that no man would err knowingly. So he apparently says that if you have the correct knowledge about morality, if you have the right knowledge about virtue and right knowledge for him is knowledge about virtues, so knowledge about virtues, if a man possesses knowledge about virtues that he would not commit any mistake, then he would be moral person.

So in case, if a person commits mistakes, moral mistakes, violates moral principles, that happens because he, that person does not possess knowledge about virtue. So a person who possesses knowledge about virtue would not commit any mistakes. So this was a Socratic picture. So no one does wrong willingly. This was a Socratic picture which when Aquinas would say that one might know the good is still not do it.

So when it comes to Aquinas there is a possibility that just because the possess, the possession of moral knowledge does not guarantee that the person would follow morality. In spite of knowing, regardless of whether or what is right and wrong, there is a tendency among people to commit mistakes, commit wrongs. So this leaves a lot of space for developing a very peculiar notion of morality by the medieval moral philosophers.

And the goal of human life again there is a very interesting difference between the Greek perspective which was largely propagated by Socrates and also to some extent by Plato and Aristotle, the virtue theory perspective, the kind of Eudaimonism which these people advocated and the goal of human life for the virtue theorists, for the Eudaimonist is Eudaimonia. It was connected with the kind of happiness, the kind of satisfaction, contentment that is contained in living a good life, a virtuous life by exercising one's virtues.

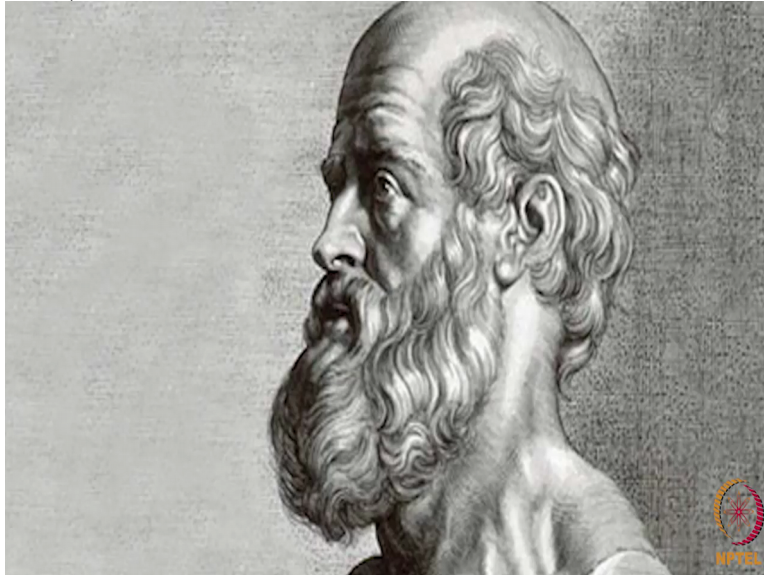
But when it comes to the moral perspective, the ethical perspectives of scholastic thinkers, the goal of human life consists in the supernatural union with God in the afterlife. So the idea of afterlife is predominantly present in the moral perspective of the medieval thinkers particularly ever since Thomas Aquinas introduced this notion. So here supernatural union with God which happens afterlife in paradise, so this entire Christian belief system was integrated into that perspective.

We can see that in contrast to the ancient Greek perspective, it is largely action centric. The Greek perspective, the Greek Eudaimonism was largely agent centric because it was benefiting the agents. The benefit for the agent was very important in that framework. But here, the action is gaining more prominence and it explains morality in terms of actions and their circumstances. The context in which an action is performed is more important.

So we can also explain say for example, in the context of a professional application, a doctor meeting the doctor and certain things happening there and finally a decision is being taken, how

difficult the treatment was can be decided purely in terms of what the doctor does and what the patient does, the actions they perform and how the entire exercise was carried out.

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## Modern Ethics

- Largely action-centric.
- Explains morality in terms of actions and their circumstances.
- What makes actions moral or immoral.
- Consequentialists: morality of an action depends on its consequences.
- Deontologists: morality of an action depends on how far it confirms to some kind of a law or command.

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In the ancient perspective, what happens is that the ancient physician, say for example the ancient tradition, both in the Hippocratic framework, the ancient Greek framework and also in the Indian framework, the physician's moral character was very important. The physician was supposed to be a person with exemplary moral character and he or she has to follow certain principles in life which also in a sense purifies his or her character.

The person, the physician being a virtuous person was very important in the ancient context but in the modern context, that is not really important. Whether the physician's moral character is good or not is not really important. In an context of action, what the physician has done when he executed his decisions on the patient, how he has performed it. That is more important in the modern context.

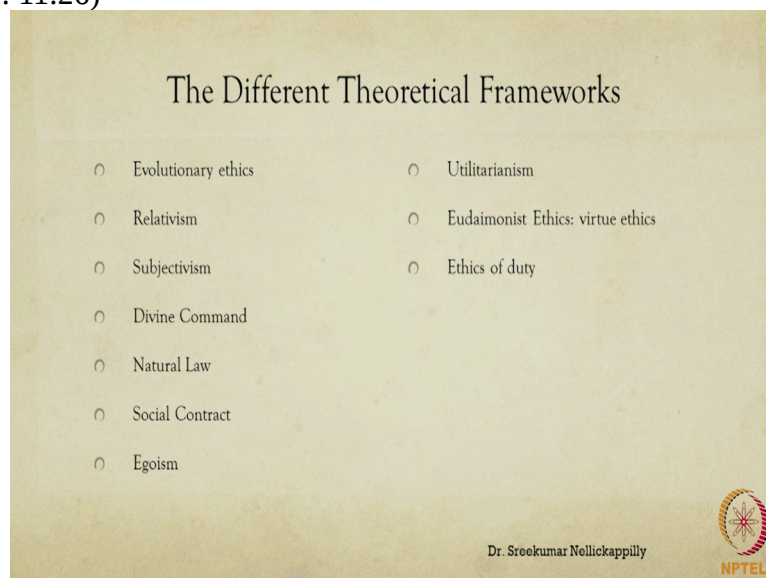
So explains morality in terms of actions and their circumstances and what makes actions moral or immoral is more important, not the character of the person that is important. And again, in the modern context, we know that we have very briefly touched upon this in one of our previous lectures. There are the broad 2 schools of thought or 2 broad approaches that gains prominence in modern period, one is the consequentialist where morality of an action depends on the consequences of an action which was largely advocated by the utilitarians and others.

And then you have the deontologists where morality of an action depends on how far it confirms to some kind of law or command. So this is a Kantian approach and many others. See for

example, the divine command theory which is again kind of non-consequentialist school of thought where the commands of God or Scriptures is more important, the scriptural command acquires prominence in that context.

I will now continue, we will have a detailed discussion on these things in the coming lectures. Now what we will see is that we will have a brief overview about the different theoretical frameworks which we are going to discuss in this lecture series. We are not going to discuss all of them in detail but some of them will be discussed in detail for a better understanding because they deserve it.

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We have the evolutionary ethics which ultimately which basically claims that ethics itself is nothing but process, a kind of practice which human beings acquire or rather ethics is nothing but something which we have acquired in the process of our evolution. So that is one way in which cope up with the world. Evolution itself is nothing but the principle of evolution talks about how better organisms cope with the world and natural surroundings.

So similarly, ethics is one of the ways in which human beings coped up with his or her surroundings and also with the world. And relativism. Relativism is a very interesting theory and a very important moral perspective because it basically says that moral principles and moral ideals are relative to people, relative to communities, relative to societies, relative to time and place. There are several factors that make things relative.

So relativism is a very strong moral theoretical perspective even today. Many prominent moral philosophers or ethicists are relativist. So we have to take relativism into account and relativism also possess a very important challenges to moral theory as such. Now subjectivism. Subjectivism is very similar to relativism. There are some similarities but subjectivism is different because it talks about that it basically argues that morality or ethics is relative to the subject, to the person concerned, to the actor.

So every person has his own moral frameworks. So which ultimately amounts to be saying that there are no moral perspectives. And then divine command theory, it is a kind of nonconsequentialist theory which says that what is good and what is right is what God has commanded. And how do we know what God has commanded? Through Scriptures. So basically, the Scriptures tell you what is right and what is good.

It basically contains a lot of moral education in 8 and we have to follow that. And then natural law, it argues that ethics is nothing but as a part of a our natural law. So that is again another interesting perspective. And social contract model developed during the modern era, it was a part of the social contract theory developed by Thomas Hobbes and many others, John Lock and many others have contributed to the development of these theories which is also considered as a very important perspective even today social contract.

It says that there exists certain implicit unwritten contract between members of a society. So every member in a society have to follow certain contracts. They are into agreement with other members and also to the society by and large and that this is the social contract theory says. And your morality is also based on that. Egoism- we have already seen a variety of egoism. The Eudaimonism is a form of egoism because it basically argues that at 6 benefits or morality benefits the agent.

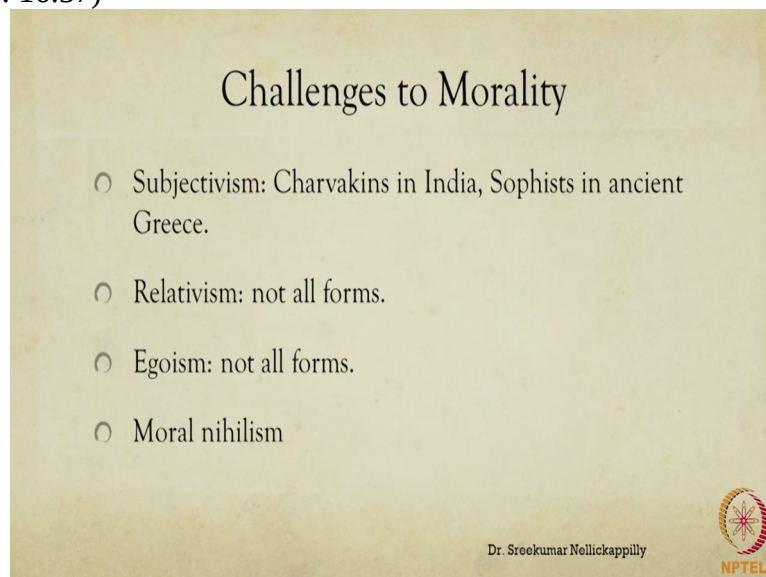
So all agent centric moral perspectives are egocentric perspectives or egoistic but there are different types of egoism. One kind of an egoism would be arguing that what is right is good for that person. Whatever action that promotes the self-interest of the person is good for that person. Again, the notion of self-interest can be interpreted in different ways. Self-interest can be related to the concept of spiritual enlightenment on the one extreme and on the other extreme, it can be related to the idea of just physical embellishments.

So egoism basically says that the self-interest of the person is more prominent in deciding the moral quality, the moral value of an action. And now, on the right-hand side I am just grouping the important theoretical frameworks which we would be elaborately discussing in this lecture series. We have the utilitarian framework where we would cover, where we would try to address, try to understand the theories of 2 prominent philosophers, Jeremy Bentham and JS mill.

And then, the Eudaimonist ethics which is the virtue ethics which we are going to examine. Right away after this lecture is required to understand the Eudaimonist perspective by understanding the historical evolution, by analysing the Socratic idea and also the Aristotelian perspectives. Then ethics of duty which is advocated by Emanuel Kant most prominently and many others. And ethics of care.

So these are some of the theoretical frameworks which we intend to address as part of this lecture series in more detail. Now there are certain challenges to morality. I putting them, very briefly trying to understand some of them but we will in course of time, in course of this lecture, we will also take up one by one.

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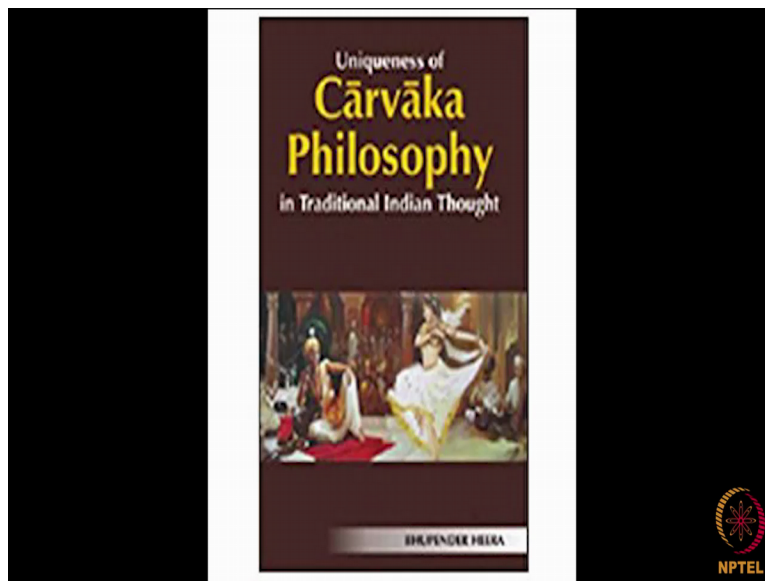


Subjectivism, subjectivism is possess the greatest challenge. We have very briefly mentioned what subjectivism is. It basically says that what is good for me is good for me and what is good for you is good for you. There is no absolute good or right. There are no absolute moral facts.

Morality is no way connected to truth or knowledge. So in that way, there are no moral facts, no moral truths and there is no moral knowledge.

So everything is but relative. This is what the subjectivist would say.

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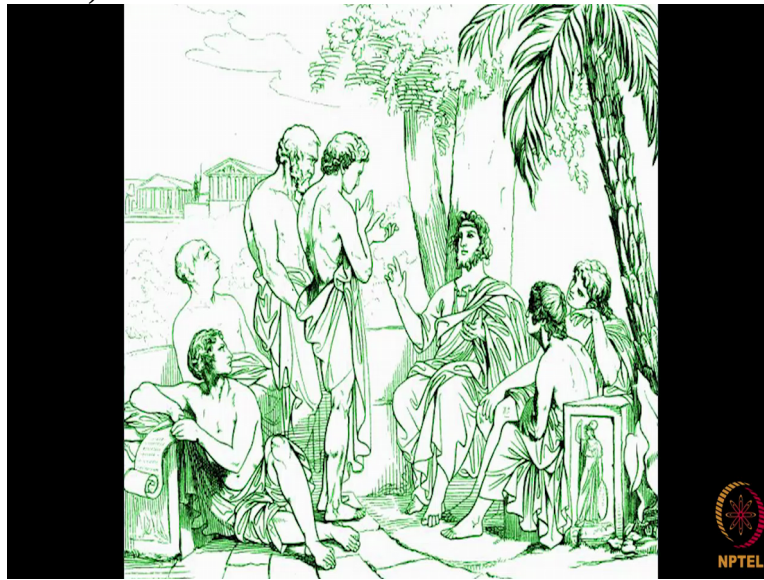


And in India we would find the advocates of this wave probably are the Charvakins. Charvakins say that eat, drink and be merry man, you will die tomorrow. This is a very strong slogan they have advocated. They are against the idea of spiritual enlightenment and following righteousness or dharma for the sake of attaining this spiritual goal because they say that the spiritual goal itself is something which is a mirage which is actually there is no absolutely uncertain about it and we do not know whether such a thing exists.

So for them, what is idea of enlightenment is related to, it is associated with the notion of physical embellishment or physical pleasure. So they argue for that. And since each person's physical pleasure is unique, like I might find pleasure in one thing and another person might find it in something else. So we cannot have a common theory about this. We also have to advocate a kind of subjectivism in association with this kind of a relativism. So Charvakins are in that way, subjectivists also.



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Then Sophists in ancient Greek, we are going to discuss Sophists contribution to philosophy and also to their contribution to moral philosophy or ethics because they played a very key role in the development of morality in the European tradition.

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### Challenges to Morality

- Subjectivism: Charvakins in India, Sophists in ancient Greece.
- Relativism: not all forms.
- Egoism: not all forms.
- Moral nihilism

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And relativism, it also opens a huge challenge to morality or ethics but not all forms of relativism. For example, there are different forms. Cultural relativism for example basically argues that different cultures have or different times, during different times and different places, people advocate or people hold 2 different views about morality which is to some extent correct

because what a particular society consider as morally valuable, need not be treated so by another society in another time. So this is quite reasonable to believe that.

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We know that see among the Eskimos, there is a practice that they kill their infants sometimes because the problem is that they find it difficult to feed all their infants because they face a huge shortage of food. So whether that practice is can be treated as right or wrong is a question. And again, the Santhara which is practised by the Jains which we have very briefly discussed in one of the previous lectures, so the Jains believe that rather the practice of Santhara was so integral to the cosmology of the Jains to understand their life, to understand their very conception of life, we need to accommodate, we need to appreciate or we need to try to understand what Santhara is, the role it plays in their life.

To argue that Santhara is nothing but suicide is again nothing but passing a moral judgement from another perspective. So this calls for the importance of understanding what relativism is. So when we try to argue that Santhara is wrong because it is something but suicide, that judgement again is made and passed from another moral perspective. So our moral perspective says that it is wrong and it is suicide but from their moral perspective, it is right and we cannot say that the concept of life advocated by one group of people is fundamentally wrong.

We cannot say that because they have your philosophy, they have the religious beliefs, they have their belief systems. So long as they do not harm others, and so long as some of them provide freedom to their community members to adopt other perspectives, we cannot argue that they are fundamentally wrong. Again, egoism. We have seen that not all forms of egoism pose a very serious threat to moral philosophy or morality as such because Eudaimonism is, he tries to arrive at a balance between individual benefits and social benefits.

So the very term egoism suggests that it underlines self-interest. It is not always necessary so. Of course, self-interest might be asserted, self-interest might be underlined but not necessarily always at the expense of harming others or at the expense of benefiting other people in the society. So, Eudaimonism is one ethical framework which tries to arrive at a balance between individual benefit or the agent's benefit and also the benefit of the society.

So by being virtuous, a person is doing good for himself and also for others. So Eudaimonism is at the same time or virtue ethics is at the same time other regarding. So in that sense we cannot say that it is purely egoistic in the negative sense of the term that it advocates only self-interest. But there are certain other forms of egoism which apparently addresses or which apparently asserts self-interest as prominent.

And sometimes the self-interest of one person, one individual might contradict, might be in conflict with the self-interest of another individual which might promote social conflicts and social unrest and chaos. So we have to address those issues when we advocate egoism as a moral perspective. But there are moral philosophers who have argued that the egoism as practiced in the correct spirit will not lead to any kind of conflicts, it will only lead to social progress.

Then moral nihilism. Moral nihilist would argue that all kinds of talk about morality is focused on. It is meaningless. There is nothing called morality, there is nothing called ethics. Many philosophers subscribe to this perspective and we will also very briefly touch upon and try to mention some of these contributions in due course of this lecture.

Now, we will just very briefly understand ethical crisis that the ancient Greek civilisation faced at a particular period of time in its development. And how this particular challenge has been


countered by another group of people. We will do that in detail in the next lecture but I will just introduce what was the problem.

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## Ethical Crisis in Ancient Greece

- The polity of ancient Greece.
- Posed by the Sophists: relativism, subjectivism and conventionalism.

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## Ethical Crisis in Ancient Greece

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The ethical crisis in the ancient Greece was introduced people called Sophists but before that for to understand the moral perspective of ancient Greece which we have already started doing, the quality of the ancient Greek people is very important, the kind of politics, the kind of citystate, kind of existence they had. That is very important. And the kind of challenges by the Sophists consist in relativism, subjectivism and conventionaism.

Most of the Sophists argued that morality has no content apart from the conventions, what the conventions demand. So morality is nothing but all morality according to them at conventional. So the consequence of this argument is that some Sophists would argue that since every morality is conventional, there is no morality. That leads to kind of nihilism. And for some Sophists it leads to extreme subjectivism and therefore nihilism.

And for some others, it leads to a kind of relativism, some kind of a cultural relativism, a group relativism and some other Sophists worldwide bridge the gap between these 2 and arrive at a kind of consensus. Then again, morality is reduced to a set of conventions and no connection between morality and truth. So once you say that, once you reduce morality conventions, then you will have to cancel, you will have to basically argue that there is no connection between morality and truth and there is no moral knowledge.

The connection between morality and knowledge also needs to be cancelled. And this is the contribution the Sophists have made and they posed very serious challenge to the Greek moral



approaches and Socrates who was trying to take up then and trying to counter them and trying to present kind of counter moral perspective. We will examine these things in the coming lectures. For the time being, we will wind up, thank you.