

Ethical Relativism and Practical Ethics

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Applied ethics or Practical ethics is the last addition to moral philosophy in the eighty decade which, it covers a wide area. The traditional moral philosophy was confined mainly to the formulation of substantive theory, i.e. of deciding what is good or right, but practical philosophy specially concern with the analysis of the specific issues of the human life, that is the practical problems of human being and tries to give solution of such problems. James M. Brown has advanced the four following thesis.

- (a) Applied ethics is the application of ethical theory.
- (b) There is one body of sound well grounded ethical theory waiting to be applied to practical problems.
- (c) Non-philosophers supply the problem and philosophers supply and apply the theory.
- (d) Professional ethics is just ordinary ethics applied to the profession of question.

These four theses is called by Caplan as ‘the engineering model of applied ethics’.¹ Applied ethics gets highly popularity in the writings of Peter Singer through his two books – (1) Applied ethics, (2) Practical ethics. Along with the revival of applied ethics, the striking development in moral philosophy is extending the scope of morality from the relations between humans and non-humans, Animals and environment. Peter Singer said that, an ethical issue as relevant if it is one that any thinking person.

must face the issues which are confront us in our day today life is, terrorism, various problems in the field of medicine, Euthanasia, Embryo experimentation, abortion, suicide etc. and environment, profession and several others. Some issues are very controversial. But a philosopher may be able to suggest something useful about whether an issue is acceptable to run or not. Because of the reasoning and analysis that philosophers practise really can make a difference than that of common people. In the modern days the development in Science and technology in general, and bio-technology and medical sciences in particular have thrown many other ethical challenges such as surrogate motherhood, rights of artificially created animals in laboratories, cloning etc. The moral issues about man-nature relationship has arisen because of serious problems of pollution, Deforestation and possibility of exhausting natural resources. The threat of nuclear weapons and fear of extinction of human race and destruction of the planet also have given rise to serious ethical issues. All these issues faced by the contemporary society have given rise to the extension of the scope of applied ethics or practical ethics day by day. That is why Peter Singer defines practical ethics as –“... To Practical issues like the treatment of ethnic minorities, equality of women, the use of animals for food and research, the preservation of the natural environment, abortion, euthanasia, and the obligation of the wealthy to help the poor.” p. 1.

Now there is a question arise in our mind that “Is practical ethics relative?” To answer this question at first we have to define the ethical relativism. Ethical relativism means there is no any universal theory of morality. The concept of right or wrong, good or bad, depends on the society, individual etc. The moral laws are very to one individual to another individual and one society to other society. The concept of right or wrong is different according to time and space. The famous applied ethical thinkers Peter Singer also discussed these matter very elaborately in his famous work ‘Practical Ethics’. At first, in the beginning of his this book he attempts to clarify the meaning of practical ethics as what ethics is not.

There is a question arisen in our mind that, “Is practical ethics relative?” To answer this question we have to discussed firstly about the meaning of the term relative or relativism. Relativism is the theory which means what

our judgements with regards to any knowledge are relative. In the case of ethical relativism it is the view about the absence of absolute knowledge of any moral ideas. That means there are various types of relativism in philosophy. They are mainly cognitive relativism, Ethical relativism, Cultural relativism etc. According to Cognitive relativism there is no any universal truth about the world. The ethical relativism is the doctrine that what is believed in an practised is right and valid for the people who believe in an practised it. Cultural relativism holds the view that there are different moral rules in various societies. Frankena the modern moral thinker said that there are three types of relativism. 1) Descriptive relativism, 2) Meta-ethical relativism and 3) Normative relativism. The first relativism holds the view that basic ethical believes of various people and societies and different and confusing in nature. The meta-ethical relativism is of the view that regarding basic ethical judgements no objectively valid way of justification. The normative relativism is based on the normative principle. For these type of relativism what is right or good for one individual or society is not right or good for another individual or society. Again Frankena holds the view that, what is really right or good in the one case is not so in another.”² So, ethical relativism holds the view that the concept of right or wrong is changed according to individual and society. The concept of morally good or bad and right or wrong are vary on the basis of time, space and individuals.

The famous practical ethician Peter Singer doesnot support the concept of ethical relativism. There are various thinkers who support that ethics is related to a society. It is true from the standpoint of one meaning but from the other standpoint is false. That is why Peter Singer says that, “The fourth, and last claim about ethics that I shall deny in this opening chapter is that ethics is relative or subjective.”³ Peter Singer elaborately explain this point by giving some practical examples. If we asserted that the idea ethics is related to the society one happens to live in. This is true on one sense and false in another. For example, it is true that as we have know that actions that are right in one situation because of their good consequences. It may be wrong in another situation because of their bad consequences. For example, casual sexual relation may be wrong when it

leads to the existance of children who is not prepared for brought up and cared for and not wrong when it doesnot lead to reproduction at all. But this is only a superficial form of relativism. While it suggest that the applicability of a specific principle like above example may be relative to time and place. As it is not applicable in our Indian society. It is immoral.

The more elementary form of relativism became popular in the 19th century when data on the moral beliefs and practices of far-flung societies began pouring in. It is not surprising that to some the new knowledge suggested not merely that the moral code of 19th century Europe was not objectively valid. But that no moral judgement can do more than reflect the customs of the society in which it is made. The Marxists adopted this form of relativism to their own theories. They said that the ruling ideas of each period are the ideas of its ruling class, and so the morality of a society is relative to its dominant economic class, and thus indirectly relative to the economic basis. That is why they refuted Bourgeois morality to objective universal validity. But this creates a problem. The problem is if all morality is relative then what is speciality of communism. The other Marxists Engels tries to answer this problems. According to him, the morality of a society divided into classes will always be relative to the ruling class, Although the morality of a society without class antagonisms would be a ‘really human’ morality. This is no longer relativism.

‘Ethics is always relative in a particular society’ – This common sense view of ethics always confused us because, one society may approve one customs but another society may disapprove the same custom. For example, slavery. In this case we have no basis to choose between this conflicting views. Indeed on a relativist analysis there is really no conflict – when we say slavery is wrong we are really only saying that our society dis-approves of slavery and when the slave owners from the other society say that slavery is right they are only saying that their society approves of it. Then we cannot argued obviously we could both be speaking the truth. At last we can say that the relativist cannot satisfactorily account for the non-conformist. There are many difficulties in ethical relativism. So, we can say that when we say one theory is right or one interpretation is right

then it will be supported by many. But relativism is not supported by all and this is the witness of it. Relativism cannot distinctly explain the ethical term good-bad, right-wrong with their actual meaning. Peter Singer rejected relativism as a unreasonable theory.

Referemce :

1. Brown James. M. "On Applying Ethics" in evans J.D.G. (Ed) moral philosophy and contemporary problems, Cambridge CUP 1987. p.81-82
2. William K. Frankena, 'Ethics', p. 109
3. Peter Singer, Practical Ethics, p. 04.