

# Ethics and Morality – a simple approach

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Ethics and Morality are not issues merely relevant to our modern times. “*Satyam Vada, Dharmam Chara*” (“Speak the truth, Practice Virtue”) was the exhortation given by the Teacher to his students, millennia ago, (Taittiriya Upanishad) during their graduation ceremony prior to their leaving the school. It indicates that untruth and lack of virtue were existent even at that time. Otherwise, there was no need for the teacher to give this parting advice!

We can safely assume that the challenges related to ethics and morality is as old as humanity! This is probably because of the difficulty in imposing self-restraining limits for exercising individual freedom while functioning as a member of the group in society or in family.

## Ethics and Morality

Although the words ‘Ethics’ and ‘Morality’ may appear to carry roughly the same meaning, there is a fundamental difference between them. “Morals” are attributes of a personal character, whereas “ethics” are the attribute of a collective social system where morals are applied. In other words, ‘morals’ are personal codes of conduct and ethics are societal codes of conduct. Even more simplified, ethics are the expectations of a group’s behaviour and morals are the personal values with which individual human behaviour is expected. Thus, there are national

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ethics, social ethics, company ethics, professional ethics, or even family ethics and when it comes individual, it is personal morality.

It can be often seen that a person’s moral code is usually unchanging but the ethics he or she practices can be other-dependent. For example, in the case of a criminal defense lawyer, though the lawyer’s personal moral code likely finds murder immoral and reprehensible, ethics demand the accused client be defended as vigorously as possible, even when the lawyer knows the accused is guilty and that a freed defendant would potentially lead to more crime. Legal ethics must override personal morals for the greater good of upholding a justice system in which the accused are given a fair trial and the prosecution must prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

## Freedom of Choice

One of the unique characteristics of human life is the infinite freedom that human mind enjoys. Mind is the only aspect of our life that is capable of growing and developing until the end of our life. Our physical body ceases to grow after twenty or twenty five initial years. Thereafter it is only our mind that grows! All the advancements we make in science, technology

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and medicine are the product of human mind and they serve as a pointer to the infinite potential that our mind holds within itself. Together with this infinite potential, we have also been granted absolute freedom to express ourselves in whatever way we choose. What is the use of potential without freedom? It is, therefore, natural that this freedom has been granted to us as a bundled offer along with the infinite potential that all of us have been born with.

Whether we are at home, or shopping in the supermarket or at work in our workplace, we always function in the company of others who enjoy similar potentials and freedom of choices; Thus we find ourselves in situations where our individual freedom and potential at interface with the individual freedom and potential of others.

Is it not natural that there is a scope for conflict at this interface? My infinite potential and freedom on one side and your infinite potential and freedom on the other side! My sense of "Morality" is my potentials expressed in a responsible manner and "Ethics" are the management of my sense of morality and its responsible application in social contexts that I find myself in.

## **The Conflict**

Personal morality can be in conflict with Social ethics!

Years ago, I was working with a chemical manufacturing company that manufactured specialized products for industrial floors. As a young Marketing Manager, I had a professional occasion where I had to bid for job in a slaughter house. In this abattoir animals were slaughtered in an 'inhuman' manner. The animals were herd together to one corner and each animal was killed casually, one after the other, in the presence of other animals by slitting its throat; All other animals stood there helplessly watching the act with fear written large on their eyes. If killing the animal for food is a matter of free choice for human beings, then that right has to be exercised in a manner that does not cause fear, pain and agony to the animal, which is also a reasonable right of the animal; There are many common sense based and technology based methods available today to achieve

this, which the abattoir did not use.

As a practicing marketer, my mission in this project was to win the contract to resurface the abattoir floor using my company's superior flooring products suitable for this specific application. My personal sense of morality did not permit me to work on this abattoir where animals are senselessly and disrespectfully slaughtered; However, business ethics required of me to do all that is possible to win the job. It is my belief that I participated in the tender as best as I could; however, my company did not eventually win this job much to my personal relief for having avoided a moral 'issue' for me.

Today, however, my ultimate analysis of this case study goes like this.

Did I consciously price myself out on this project? Probably yes, I am not sure though! If that was so, was it right to do so? Probably not! Did my company have the right to go all out and win this contract using its superior product? Yes, they have this free choice and I should honour it! Do the animals have a right to be killed without fear and pain? Yes, they have. Do I have the right to uphold my personal sense of morality? Yes, I have, since I have the freedom of choice. Was it right on my part to consciously price my company out of this job or not negotiating the price down? No, it was not right, if I ever have done it.

All are right! What is the solution, then? Speaking with hindsight and with improved wisdom gained over the graying years, I should have gone all out and won the contract and execute the contract with a mission in mind. I should have used the contact and friendship gained through the contract to bring about a better understanding to the abattoir management about their ethical responsibility to animals and encourage them to enforce higher level of ethical approach in slaughtering animals.

## **A Simple Approach**

Adopting a holistic approach is a pragmatic way to address all moral and ethical decision making. This is my favourite method when confronted with ethical

and moral issues in my life for a long time now. I find it extremely simple and easy to apply in any situation, be it personal or professional.

Life never happens in isolation; Life is always a holistic and wholesome expression. We are ourselves a huge collection of cells, tissues, muscles and organs forming the body-mind-mechanism that we call human. We can observe that every single member of this collection works in absolute harmony with one another giving the body mind mechanism the best physical and mental condition to survive and thrive. If any member of this collective functionalities begin to function on their own with its own self-serving agenda and objective, the organism perishes. When the organism perishes, the individual functionalities also perish along with it!

A cancerous cell destroying whole life is an example of this principle in action. A rogue cell can destroy life; a rogue individual can destroy the family, a rogue family can destroy the society, a rogue society can destroy the nation and a rogue nation can destroy our planet, which in turn can destroy a significant portion of this cosmos if so desired. The reverse is also true. Only in a robust and healthy society, families can thrive, only in robust and healthy families, individuals can thrive and only in a robust and healthy body-mind-mechanism individual components will be able to remain healthy and robust. This is an undeniable fact.

Thus, we can see that health and harmony results when each member of this holistic formation function for a higher overall purpose other than its own mere gleeful survival. This is the great clue we have to pick from Nature!

When we are in moral or ethical dilemma, ask this fundamental question to ourselves. "Is this what I am going to do now, is in conformity to the higher purpose of life that I can see in action in Nature?" "If the answer is YES, just go about doing it; if no, refrain from doing it. The questions to ask are the following:

"Is this that I am personally going to do now is for the highest good of everything beyond myself or my family?" "Is this that my family as a group is going to

do now is for the highest good of our society that we live in?" "Is this that my society / my organization going to do is for the highest good of the country that we live in?" "Is this that our country is going to do now is for the highest good of our planet?"

## Ethics of Organizations

Ethics to organizations are like morality to individuals; Quality of organizational ethics generally depends on the morality of the highest member of authority in the organization; It can be the influential managers or owners of the organizations, from where the organizational values permeate down through the rank and file of the organization.

Radical social changes are not possible without the refinement of our understanding at the core individual level. Sage *Patanjali* (circa Second century BC) built the edifice of *Ashtanga Yoga* (eight fold Yoga path) on two fundamental personal aspects. They are (1) *Yama*, which are guidelines for our relationship with our external world and (2) *Niyama*, which are guidelines for our relationship with ourselves. The *Yama* principles are based on (1) Non-violence (2) Truthfulness (3) Non-stealing (4) Using all resources only for its intended purposes (5) Non-accumulation of unnecessary wealth. The *Niyama* principles are based on (1) Cleanliness (2) Joyfulness (3) single minded focus on all Efforts (4) Self improvement (5) Bringing sense of divinity in activities. These are suggestions for personally refining and ennobling qualities in life and act as pointers to the importance of changes required at individual levels.

In the final analysis, it can be seen that, both morality and ethics originate from the individual self - no matter whether it is personal life or professional life. Each one of us, in the privacy of our own hearts, should understand the higher purpose of life and should take a voluntary, evolutionary resolution to live a life in conformity to the principles of a higher purpose in life. Once the critical mass of population has done that, the rest will follow it faster and easier. Till such time, ethical and moral issues will continue to plague our society.

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