

Questions for the NPTEL video course titled ‘Ethics’

Many of these questions are open-ended and I would be happy to share my feedback on your writings - pl send them to me over email should you wish a feedback on the same.

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1. Introduction to theories in Ethics:

a. Introduction (Crito)

- i. Do you agree with Crito or Socrates in the choices that they support in Plato’s play titled ‘Crito’? Justify your position.
- ii. How would you understand ‘civil disobedience’ in the light of this play?

b. Consequentialist and Non-consequentialist theories

- i. What is the difference between consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories in Ethics? Give examples.
- ii. Human actions operate in a complicated environment with enormous variables. In this complication, the intended consequence may differ from the actually attained consequence. Assess this claim and its effect on the debate between consequentialism and non-consequentialism.
- iii. Consequentialists and non-consequentialists argue for certain values, but differ in their justifications. Attempt justifying moral notions like ‘justice’ or ‘rights’ both from the consequentialist and the non-consequentialist camp.

c. Hedonism

- i. What is Hedonism?
- ii. If all that we do is what we wish to do, the notion of sacrifice, social service and altruism become meaningless. For we aim at the satisfaction derived from sacrifice, social service and altruism, and in this way, we actually perform such deeds for the joy or satisfaction that they bring to us. Hence hedonism explains all human actions. Discuss.

d. Utilitarianism

- i. Can all facets of human actions be measured and decided by utility?
Take a position, identify a few examples to substantiate your position.

e. Deontological Theories (Immanuel Kant)

- i. Is there any ultimate/sustainable distinction between consequentialists and deontologists?
- ii. Does Kant argue for a humanly unattainable moral theory?

f. Ethical Rules (WD Ross)

- i. Rules are mechanical. Can we programme moral rules (such as that of WD Ross) into a machine and the machine can thereafter become a moral advisor?

g. Situation Ethics

- i. Context is everything in human decision making, especially moral decision making and we simply cannot function on the basis of theories. React to this claim in light of 'situation ethics'.

h. Virtue Ethics

- i. Bring out the limitations in rules, principles and theories as the basis of moral thinking and action. How does Virtue Ethics claim to overcome them?

2. Meta-ethical Theories

a. Ethical Relativism: Is Anything Wrong at all?

- i. What, if at all, can be the basis of holding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as universal?
- ii. Can a moral relativist ever disagree with someone else's moral claim? Why?

b. Ethical Naturalism

- i. All phenomenon can be understood in terms of natural properties, and

morality is no exception. Discuss.

c. Non-naturalism

- i. Can there be non-natural properties? Follow GE Moore in his analysis of the term 'good' in natural terms, and present your reactions to it.

d. Non-cognitive or Nondescriptivist Theories

- i. Can we reason or even discuss moral issues? If this be the case, predict implications of such a world view.

e. Intuitionism

- i. Intuitionism just circumvents moral thinking. Opine.

f. Approach to an Adequate Theory; the Moral point of view

- i. Can humans conceive an amoral existence?
- ii. Explore the relation between free choice and morality?

g. Why be Moral?

- i. State the several justifications discussed on the reasons for being moral.
- ii. How does Plato answer the question 'Why be Moral?' ?

3. Ethics in the Indian tradition:

a. Dharma- meaning, definition and classification

- i. 'Dharma' cannot be translated as 'religion' - bring out some of the senses of 'Dharma' are not captured by 'religion'.

b. Theory of Karma

- i. 'We are the doer of deeds.'The sense of agency is intrinsic to human existence. Comment.
- ii. How would the theory of Karma affect the notion of freewill?

c. Nishkam Karma

- i. Nishkama Karma claims that humans can act without the motivation

that the intended consequence provides. Is this a psychological paradox?

d. Gandhian Ethics

- i. In light of Gandhi's ethics - would you regard him as a saint, philosopher or politician?

e. Pursarthas

- i. What are the Purusarthas cited in the Indian tradition? Juxtapose them in contemporary life and assess its significance to contemporary times.

f. Buddhist Ethics

- i. Explore the relevance of the Buddhist ethics in contemporary times.
- ii. Conceive the macro-economic implications of a Buddhist way of living.

g. Jaina Ethics

- i. Do you find the Jaina ethics too esoteric? Juxtapose their ethical claims in contemporary times and present an assessment of their significance.

4. Some Ethical Issues:

a. The Personal life: Family and friends; Sexuality; Virtues

- i. I did not choose to be born, my parents created me and hence it is their responsibility to raise me till I can sustain myself. I do not owe anything to my parents rather my parents owe a decent upbringing to me. Do you agree? Justify your position.
- ii. Friends do not owe each other anything. At most they may favour each other.
- iii. Can friendship be sold - it is more honest and transparent that way, instead of tacitly looking for gain through friendship?
- iv. How does Aristotle analyze friendship?

b. Liberty and Equality: Free Speech; Sexual and Racial Discrimination; Affirmative Action

- i. If a surgeon trades her services for a fee, why should a prostitute not do so?
 - ii. Give examples from the border area where a person's right to free speech interferes with another person's right to privacy. Try formulating a defining line to distinguish the two.
 - iii. We choose the friends that we wish to have. If an employer chooses to hire employees according to the race or religion the employer is comfortable with, why should it be considered unfair?
 - iv. If my ancestors were discriminated against by their peers, do I owe any reparation from the progeny of the discriminators?
 - v. Can responsibility be a collective issue, that is, can a collective be held responsible for an act or is it always individuals alone who can be held responsible? What are problems of either view?
 - vi. If she inherits her mother's wealth, should she also inherit her mother's responsibilities?
- c. Justice: Punishment; Economic Justice; World Hunger and International Justice
- i. When there are so many people in the world starving, excess eating induced obesity should be considered a moral wrongdoing. What do you think?
 - ii. Renowned philosopher and public intellectual Michael J Sandel claims that we are moving from a market economy to a market society where market norms are invading and changing social norms to market norms. What do you think?
 - iii. If you are looking for directions in a new town, a bystander offers to give you directions to your destination and claims a monetary fee for the same, is there anything morally wrong with it?
 - iv. If I want to sell my kidney and someone wants to buy it, and there is no physical coercion involved, should I be allowed to trade my kidney?

- v. If law courts start awarding hefty monetary fines as an alternative to imprisonment or even death penalty, and the victim or victim's representatives consent to it - should we (society) implement this arrangement?

d. Environmental Ethics

- i. Can the environment be considered as an object of moral judgement or only human persons are the rightful object of moral judgement? Take a stand and attempt a justification of your position.
- ii. Preserving and caring for the environment is important. Why? Reason from a consequentialist and a non-consequentialist perspective.
