

Philosophy and Critical Thinking
Prof. Gyan Prakash
Department of Humanities & Social Sciences
IIT ISM, Dhanbad
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Lecture 22: Virtue Ethics

Welcome in lecture 22. Today, I will be discussing virtue ethics. Last class, we have discussed about ethics and why ethics is important. We also have discussed the branches of ethics where we have talked about metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Now, as we have discussed in last class, the normative ethics is the part of this course. So today, I will be discussing the normative ethics and since this course is a very basic level, I will not be discussing many things in detail. So just I will be discussing some explanation and the definition of the concept of the principles. So, in normative ethics, today I will be discussing virtue ethics, one of the main theories of the normative ethics. Now, let us understand what exactly is virtue ethics.

In last class, we have discussed that why ethics is important. Now, if you see our Indian system or our family or the society, we always we are talking about the value or value system and the value system plays a very important role when we are in dilemma or when we are trying to take a decision. So, making a decision, this value plays a very important role, what to do and what not to do. And these are the values because it is in a well accepted let us say, which is in a part of metaethics that why we are arguing that this value is correct and so on or the moral is correct, so on. Anyway, so today what we are discussing is ethics. Now, the question arises that ethics of, I mean ethics what kind of we should think, should recommend to the society. So, there is one thing that we are as a member of society or a religious group or a family, what we are doing, we are giving, prescribing set of action or maybe set of greater traits to a next generation or to other. So basically, what we are doing, we are saying this set of action is good, if you are going to perform this set of action is always good, recommending. In like for example, in my society, when I was very small, there is one value or the moral teaching from my family is to get that whenever you are getting anything on a street, for example, the money. Suppose I am walking and I got money, so they ask me not to use for yourself. Either you ask, I mean if there is someone who has lost money or if it is not, no one is there, then use this money for others, not for yourself. Now, the idea is when I am like going for walk and the moment I saw this, for example, 100 rupees of note, what I will be doing, I am not going to think of anything since I have the system, I am going to use this one. Set of action type we are recommending. Now, there are here, it does not mean that this is the only way to do that. So there are two things. One side, the group of people are saying that we should recommend the set of actions. We say that this action is good, this action is not good and so on. And then other side, there are another group who are saying that no, what we have to do, we have to talk about the character traits. For example, compassion, friendliness. So, this kind of if the

person is in a kind, he will be always performing in a good action. If compassion is in your personality, in your character traits, then you will be always performing on a good action. This side of group are they saying, no, we have to recommend the set of action, not the character traits. So, we should say that okay, this set of action is good. For example, what we are arguing that, no, if you go for this character traits, that is always good. For example, we are recommending set of action, for example, act of killing is not good or killing human is not good, hurting others is not good. Stealing is not good, lying is not good. We are always talking about a set of action. We should not perform this action because these actions are bad. In other side, there is an argument that no, we have to go for the character traits. Now, why we are doing that? For example, in movies, act of killing or hurting others is not good. But a hero who is killing villain, we are always happy, clapping, why? Because we believe this person is good. This person has this quality. So, even he is performing that action, this action is good action. So, one person he has in a proper this or noble or he has an excellent character trait, then he will be always performing in a good action. He will always be setting an example for the others. So, here is all about that if person is good, what we say that when person is good, you always perform a good action, a good set of actions. Now, the question arises, even the person is good, how you are going to judge him whether he is good or not through action and therefore, action is important. So, therefore, we have to talk about the action. This side, this is what we call virtue ethics. This is what we call when we in virtue ethics, we always talk about the character traits. Now, for example, in the classroom or in a room or in my house, suppose there in a person and who is aware that I am there and he performed five set of or six set of like actions. Now, based on an action, can we talk about his character traits? No. So, therefore, what they are saying, let us always go for the character traits, not the action. Sometime we are recommending a set of action, but it does not mean that, for example, as in last class, I was giving an example of suppose in evening walks, for example, you saw a very old person and he is trying to carry something. Since you have this value that one should respect the city member. So, he thought of like helping this person and then you approach this person, you realize that this person is carrying something which is not acceptable, which we feel that is not right. Now, are you going to help this person? No, obviously not. So, therefore, they are saying that no, all but go for the character traits. Let us go for this virtue ethics. Like for example, in Indian system, there is no school of thought is called Buddhism, Buddhist philosophy. They always talk about the character traits. He said, no, you think you always you have to add this friendliness, compassion, kindness, very kind. And if you have this set of character traits, you will be always performing good action. So, what we are doing here in this character traits or in virtue ethics, we are not recommending set of action. What we are doing recommending set of character traits. This kind of thing is to include in your personality. You have to be like this. You have to be it only means that when you are practicing this kind, now that is in your personality. So, you are practicing like a habitat. Now, this is a part of your character. So, this person is now very kind. So, if there are any

genuine person who is approaching this person for any help, he is ready to do that. Kindness, compassion, if someone is suffering, he will be always helping this person. So, in Indian system, Buddhism always talks about the virtue ethics for the virtue or the character traits. They do not prescribe the set of action saying that this set of action is good, that set of action is not good. However, here it is clear that there are two sides, some of them arguing about the action, that is to recommend a set of action and what kind of action is right and what kind of action not right. So, it is a study of what are the right and wrong action. Here, this side, we are talking about the character traits, what are the character traits is right and so on, and how you can perform these things. I will be discussing today the virtue ethics, where we will talk about well in detail that what is virtue ethics and what is even the problem with the virtue ethics. Now, this side, action does not mean that any action, action means any moral action. This is the set of amoral action is right and moral action is not right. So, virtue based ethical theories place much less emphasis on which rules people should follow and instead focus on helping people develop a good character trait such as kindness, generosity, that if you have this kind of character traits, you will be always performing a good action. And even in our society, if person has kindness and generosity or compassion, we always believe that whatever he is going to do, whatever he is going to perform is always good. Because this person is like this. For example, Gautam Buddha, what after realization, whatever he performed, right sort of action we are taking as an example. This is how he has served. So, what main point is in virtue ethics, what we do, we talk about the character traits, where we do not recommend, we do not say that the set of action is good or set of action is not good, moral action. Now, so today in this class, we will be discussing this only virtue ethics, what is virtue ethics, and this side we will be discussing in the next class. So, this is our topic of today discussion is the virtue ethics. Now, virtue is an excellent trait of character, where we talk about, for example, honesty, for example, compassion, courage, and so on. But one thing you need to understand is that honesty and compassion, it does not mean that you are doing and performing the set of action because you believe that this is how I can save myself. Suppose, for example, someone is selling some object or something, for example, vegetable, and this person is not giving you less than a kg, suppose you ask him one kg sugar or one kg tomato or anything, and this person or for example, me, I am not giving less than one kg, because I believe that if I am going to do that, that I am like, they can punish me, or law may punish me. So, what I am doing, I am like showing this honesty, it is worth to say this is not, when you are performing this, you are honest, because you believe this is the right thing to do. Not because you are afraid of something, or you are behaving because you believe that if I am going to do that, I will be caught, or someone else may harm me or punish me and so on, whatever, and other things. So, when we are talking about the character traits, it only means that you believe this is the right way of doing that, or this is a habit where you are doing this. Now, there is a problem with virtue ethics that, this is how is an argue, one may argue that generosity, honesty, compassion and courage, despite being virtue are

sometimes fault, in the sense that when you have, you are like generous, you are very honest, for example, very kind, sometime, I mean, if you see our day to day life or our society, you will find that many of people like what they are doing misusing life, for example, this honesty sometimes, I am very honest, a person who is like, I believe that lying is not a good idea. Now, what to do, for example, I am taking, give you an example, suppose there is an in village, there is commotion, is always running in there, here and there, and then, and you knew, you know that what happened. So, one old lady, see, goes to you and asks you, what happened? Why everyone is running here and there? Now, you are aware that if I am going to say that there are some wild animals near her house, since this person, the lady or maybe gents, whatever, this person, this old person, may lose his life or may give a sock, for example. So, are you going to tell this person that what happened and what is happening or you are going to say something else? What my point is, if the truth is very harsh, what are you going to do now? If you are very kind or you are performing in a set of action with emotion, then they are saying you may not be able to perform a right action. Now, we will see that, for example, example of an act of children, right. So, virtuous agent is motivated by emotion or intonation, not by a rational choice, then there will be a problem. If you are not thinking rationally, you are a very emotional person, right. You are very generous, that is right, but at the same time, you are also very emotional. Now, you are not applying your rationality, you are not thinking rationally and performing action. This is not right way of doing, right. So, they are saying that, I mean, this is become a fault action, right. So, whenever if you have this kind of traits, still you have to think rationally, you have to and then you need to perform, yeah. Aristotle believed that the reliance on motivation or by inclination is natural virtue. For example, as a child, small kid, you are asking, even the kid is having like chocolate, just to act that you also want this chocolate, you are very hungry, this kid is going to give you. This is a natural virtue, but we have. But you have to perfect this virtue and it is only possible by fornicies or practical wisdom. So, practical wisdom is a very important part. This is how Aristotle is arguing. So, even you have the natural virtue, practical wisdom is going to play a very important role. Now, practical wisdom is the knowledge or understanding that they enable it possesses to do just that in any given situation. I will give you, my example. When I was doing my PhD, so one day I was in the market. And someone, I was standing, I was waiting for my friend and then someone tapped on back and then he said hi, then I just move around and saw that there is a person with bag and again I saw that there is a next to him, two females. So, I realized that she is wife or maybe another daughter or maybe some other family member. So, I asked, okay, what happened? Then this person said that we are coming from a very remote area to this place to meet our relative, but when we went there, no one was there. It was locked. Now, we do not have money to go back. Now, he wants help. Help means in more distance. Now, what to do? So, what I did, I asked few more questions, trying to understand things rationally. Okay, I was feeling bad about the situation, what happened to this person, how this person is will be going back to the home

without money, that is even not possible, right. So, therefore, what I did, I asked few more questions, try to understand the situation and finally I realized they are really in the situation. So, I helped. Now, my intention is just to tell you that the rational choice is very important. If you are rationally, you are not thinking, then you may not be able to perform action or you are performing action with emotion or inclination, It will become a fault. Now, the Aristotle is talked about the Eudaimonia, which means happiness or flourishing. Happiness is not in what we are in sense using the happiness. The happiness is the ultimate good, right. And this concept is a value-leading concept of highest good. A virtuous soul is well ordered soul. This is how the Aristotle is arguing, then one in which that right relation exists between reason, feeling and desire. The virtue is a kind of moderation in that it aims that at the mean, the mean between excess and deficiency. So, you are not going in any extreme, you are going to the mean, right. So, there is an in between and you are going for that. So, what the Aristotle arguing, virtue it does not mean that you are always performing in an in extreme, right. And therefore, he argued that virtuous man is the standard and measures of things. So, virtue is a disposition or habit involving deliberate purpose or choice consisting in a mean that it is relative to ourself. The mean being determined by reason or a prudent man would determine it. So, if there is any situation, you are not just so kind, you are not also very hard. So, there are two extremes, you are not going in any other extreme and finally what you are doing, you are performing in an action, always going with the reason, always going with the rational choice. You are not too emotional and performing an action with an inclination, right. And therefore, Aristotle believe that the highest good for man is self-realization, right. So, when you are realizing yourself, then it will be easy to perform an action. If you are a normal person, you may die for others, right. You are going to perform always very virtuous actions, right. So, even if you take an example of the Buddhist philosophy in Indian system or the Indian philosophy, the person is performing an action with this rationality. They can go in any state, but rationality is a very important thing. So, a virtuous friend is a natural desirable to a virtuous man. For that which is naturally good is good and pleasant in itself to the virtuous man. So, if you have a friend, I mean, you are a virtuous person, always the person who is like the same will like you, right, will be believed now in you. Now, they are believing that anything is good because it is good in itself, not if this action is good because of X, Y and Z, right. So, this is what is all about the virtue ethics and however, it also does not mean that there is no problem with the virtue ethics. In philosophy and even in discourse is in philosophy and critical thinking, so we also have to think everything, every theory as critically, right. So, there is no theory and then you have to examine this theories critically. So, there are a problem, I mean while reading this Stanford Encyclopedia, I have gone through many problems. Just I am putting here two, three, four problems, just to give an idea that what kind of problem if they are going to accept this virtue ethics, right. So, virtue ethics talks about the character traits. Now, they have an argument that when we are prescribing, when you are saying that let us go for the character traits, not the action and what they believe

that this set of action is not always good. I mean, this set of action, this set of state of character is not very good, right and they say that this is what you have to go for it. If you are doing that rationally is always good. So, person has this set of excellent traits, he is a person who will be always performing a good action, right.

Now, let us see what are the problems, with this theory. If you are going to accept this theory, for example, the virtue ethics is the right ethics, for example, what are the problem we can face? So, first problem is in an application, how are we going to apply that, right. Now, what does it mean in an application? For example, you are confused, right, between two things. Now, how to choose what action is on the right action, right. We have to see, you know, that, okay, if there is a theory and then we have to apply that theory in such particular situation, right. We will say that, okay, fine, look, if you are in this dilemma, moral dilemma, so if you apply it and you may get the result and finally you can perform an action, right. So, therefore, so where we are going to do that, even suppose, there is a person who is not that virtuous, who cannot use this rational rationality or rational choice, you cannot go for it. How are you going to guide it? How are you going to say that, what kind of things you have to do it, I mean, in particular situation. Now, another one is adequacy is not adequate in the sense that any, you have any problem, if you apply it, you may not be able to perform a right action. Or someone is performing an action because he believes this is the way we should perform, we should perform in the sense that he is performing because believing that others may think or how I am going to, you know, like for example of like what I said about the selling thing, right. So, this person is performing a virtuous action, one action, but he is believing that if I am going to do that, the law will punish me or the society will punish me and therefore I should perform this action. Now, if there is a situation, right, a situation in the sense that conflict, a situation is that you are in dilemma what to do and you believe that both is right. Like for example, you are very kind, very compassion, then maybe you are silent on even lying, right, someone is lying but you are silent because because of the kindness, because of the compassion. Now, what to do? Even you are going to perform an action in virtue ethics or according to this, there are philosopher arguing that you cannot have a proper justification. So, therefore, they believe that these are the problems with the virtue ethics because they believe when we are talking about any theory, we also have to see the application of that right. So, that is the reason that they argued that how this philosophy and this ethics is not adequate or this is not on a, let us say, is a universal right or and it has a problem. So, this theory, this philosophy, this virtue ethics is not problematic in terms of the application, in terms of the many other situations, the certifications. And so on. Yeah. So, this is all about the virtue ethics and it was a very short introduction of virtue ethics just to have an idea that what virtue ethics is all about. In Indian system, virtue ethics, Buddhist philosophy talks about this virtue ethics and who talks about the excellent traits of the character, right. In western philosophy, it started with all Aristotle and Plato where they talked about the Eudaimonia and so on.

So, thank you for your kind annotation. This talk was based on this book and then Stanford encyclopedia. Thank you so much for your kind attention. Thank you.