

Moral Thinking: An Introduction To Values And Ethics

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Week - 02

Lecture - 11

Egoism and Altruism by Ayn Rand

Hello everyone. Now we are coming to an end, to the second module, of the course on Moral Thinking. Today we will take a, fleshed out, lived example, of what we mean by, or where ethical concepts are implemented, and how we can alter, the meaning of an ethical notion, or how a paradigm has particular notion. So, this particularly starts from the notion of, Egoism and Altruism. Now Egoism is something that, we have talked about earlier. And in Egoism, we have looked and we have talked about, well the paradox of Egoism, that how Egoism tries to be a catch-all theory.

We have not talked about Altruism. Now Altruism is an example of, where we find, the agent or the person, needs to sacrifice oneself for the good of others, and gains advantage, or gains joy, or gain satisfaction, in this activity of sacrificing oneself. So, Altruism is something, which has been very frequently celebrated, as a venerable quality. Right.

Now, till now we have been talking about various theories. And, I would perpetually like to address, the sceptic in all of us, in you particularly, who would be questioning that, what is the point of these theories, where does it touch the world out there. And that is quite a valid question, that if you are having, as what is it that makes, these moral theories, concepts that we talk about, how does it change the world, how does it affect the world. Today's text chosen, is an example that answers this particular sceptical query, that one can have. That how do the moral concepts matter, how do they change the world, that we live in.

Now, many of you may have heard of, Ayn Rand. Ayn Rand is an author, is a Philosopher. And, this book is probably in the 1960s, 1965, if I remember correctly. Ayn Rand is a very famous literature. She has written books like, The Fountainhead.

Books that have defined a generation. Right. That have defined a generation. And, let

me hit the nail on the head, has laid the foundation of capitalism, as a theory. So, here we find that, Ayn Rand is essentially a storyteller.

She is making story. She is newly migrated to the, United States of America, from the erstwhile USSR. And, you can get an idea of the kind of environment, she is coming from, a very controlled economy, a very paternalistic nation-state, to a freer nation-state. There is a migration there, that takes place. Now, she puts out, writes novels, stories.

Fountainhead is one of them. Atlas Shrugged. Many of you may have read it. Those of you, have not read it. Let me briefly tell you, what is the philosophy, that she advocates through it.

And here, we come to see, the connection between, Literature and Philosophy. Very often, when we find that well, there is a literature, that encapsulates philosophy. Because I would like to put forth, that literature is the vehicle of philosophy. So, let me, literature is the vehicle of philosophy.

Okay. Now, let me put this back into perspective. So, when you watch a movie, or when you watch a movie, that has the power to change the way you perceive world, or live your life, or be inspired. It generally has a story. But, the story has a philosophy, that has been fleshed out in the form of a story. Ayn Rand does exactly that, and that too, at a massive scale.

Ayn Rand has argued for the capitalist spirit, for the capitalist philosophy, championing freedom, not equality, championing freedom to the individual, as the foundation of any good world order. So well, look at the intimidating title, she chooses. Now, this particular, the text that you are referring to here, is a book called, Ayn Rand's The Virtue of Selfishness, 1965. And this is published by various publishers. You can choose any publisher.

In that, the first chapter is, the Objectivist Ethics. So, this particular book is not in the form of a story. But, this articulates the philosophy, that her novels have been talking about. And here is where, you see how philosophy connects to the world. She has inspired a whole generation of entrepreneurs, of capitalists, of a world order, where capitalism is celebrated, and not seen as, in many quarters capitalism was seen as something, evil, or wicked, or inhuman.

And that is why, look at the intimidating title, that she starts with, called The Virtue of Selfishness. So, when we talk about, The Virtue of Selfishness, it seems contrary, right. That selfishness is something very bad. And, Altruism talks about selflessness. And

therefore, being selfless is a good thing.

And, being selfish is a bad thing. These are preliminary notions, that we come with. And that is what, the author is trying to challenge. And she is trying to find the, Virtue of Selfishness. So, this is an philosophical exercise here, in this particular chapter of this book, Virtue of Selfishness, the first chapter called, The Objectivist Ethics.

She articulates, what she means by the, why she holds selfishness as a virtue. Now, what is, and here what does she do. She starts by giving a new concept of Egoism. She looks at, the history of morality. She looks at, let me give a perspective.

And what would. The way, you should go about this particular lecture is, you should first listen to this lecture. That will give you a brief overview of, what this particular chapter is talking about. Then, visit this particular chapter in the text, and read that thoroughly. And then, in a discussion hour, or then revisit this lecture, or in a discussion hour, we can discuss the same. So, what Ayn Rand is doing.

She is giving a new concept of Egoism. The history of morality, or of Mankind's Ethics. Let me just read out the screen, and then we can discuss it, point by point. History of morality of Mankind's Ethics, has been of more harm than use. Ethics has been objective, necessity, vis-a-vis, Ethics has objective, or necessary, versus subjective or luxury.

What makes values possible. That is a fundamental question, that she talks about. Morality. Is there anything rational, irrational about it. And what are the sources of morality. And the indestructibility, and morality argument.

So, now coming to the first point. She takes a look at the history of morality. And then, she asks the question, that well, what has been the history of morality. It has caused us more harm than benefit. It has ascribed certain acts as good, certain acts as bad, very often whimsically, very often based on someone's whims.

And thereby, has actually caused more harm than good. So, we are typically talking of, say, which burning societies, or societies where superstition prevailed, where the notion of right and wrong, almost was a license to kill. And it continues till date. So, she looks at Ethics and questions, whether that has actually caused us good, or it has caused us more harm. And in that sense, whether Ethics is objective or subjective.

The popular notion, of course very often comes to be, that well, Ethics is subjective, and to each his or her own. Now, whether this holds, that if this is the case, then there is

nothing objective about Ethics, and everything seems to be subjective. So, it is a luxury of the Aristocratic class, to reflect on life, and to think of what matters, and what does not matter. And have reflections on morality, which are subjective. And therefore, just a matter of pleasant conversation, rather than anything necessary about it.

So, what makes values possible. And that is a very foundational question, that we come across. Now, the author raises these questions, for us to answer them. But, she also gives it an answer. Like any good philosophical treatise, it has an opening foundational questions to it. But then, after that, it starts answering those questions, arguing for a position that it takes.

So, what makes values possible. Morality, is there anything, can we have rationality or irrationality, ascribe to the domain of morality, can we look at it as irrational. Because, if we look at it as irrational, well, there is nothing much to do about it. It seems to be, one's own whims and fancies. And therefore, there is no argument about it, there is no implementation about it. Clearly, the author is arguing against that.

The source of morality, where does morality come from. The source of, whether it comes from whims, from revelations, from metaphysics, from society, survival, or mortality. Where does this notion of morality, come from. So now, before she starts answering the question, let us look at the big picture, that she is trying to paint, which you should have in mind, before you read the text for the first time. The author is arguing for a capitalist world order.

And, she justifies the capitalist world order, as something that is, championing freedom. And, by championing freedom, it becomes a morally just world order. And, in a capitalist world order, people are able to flourish, because they have their freedoms expressed. They have lesser limitations, from others. Now, in the same breath, does that mean that, if we have lesser limitation by others, is this license, that anyone can do, what they want to do.

No. That is not, what she is arguing for. She is in fact, re-conceptualising, that what is it, to be selfish. What is it. Selfish is a word, that goes quite a negative connotation. And, selflessness is something, that is eulogised. And, please remember that, whenever you read a text or an author, you have to locate them, in the background, that they come from.

Here, Ayn Rand is protesting against the altruistic grain, ingrained in the notion of Christianity, the popular religion of then and there, at that time, where sacrifice and altruistic meaning was greatly appreciated. And, selfishness was something, looked

upon as wicked, evil, and quite a deplorable way of living life. This is true, even today, that selflessness carries an aura of moral superiority, over selfishness, which almost is seen as something, which is condemnable. But here, Ayn Rand turns the table, re-conceptualises the term, that what is it, that makes selfishness so bad.

And, is selfishness so bad at all. So first, her verdict, she starts with, well, there is nothing wrong with selfishness. And then, what does she mean by selfishness. A selfishness is what she, as we would see later, calls, rational selfishness. Selfishness, not that, you get something at somebody else's cost, not your dog eat dog world. But, a world in which, where you are able to focus on your own goals.

Now, look at it, how Ayn Rand has been a wildly popular author, and people have been at the level of followers. They have built their own institute, where it is advocated philosophy, not just in academic circles, but to popularise Ayn Rand's way of thinking, as the right way of living. So, when philosophy very often matures into ideology, it is powered by its own ideas. And, there is a institutional built, to promote and promulgate these ideas, not just as in thought provoking, or amusement, or entertainment, or intellectual gymnastic, rather as a way of changing lives. There have been philosophers, who have been presidents, both in, Professor Sarvabali Radhakrishna is one example.

And, of course, the North America also had, John Hospers, a philosopher, who fought for presidency on his idealistic grounds. Of course, did not win the election, but fought there. So, there are philosophies and philosophers, which touch the world out there. So, one is very convinced and clear about one's philosophy, one goes ahead and does that. One of the vehicles, or one of the ways of doing this, is literature.

Movie makers are philosophers, in a sense. Especially people, a significant movies that are made, movies that can alter the way, we look at the world, can question the way, we look at the world, are examples of philosophers, or philosophies finding expression in stories. If you even look at the notion of our Epics, or Epics in any civilisations, Epics are generally stories. These stories are not stories, for entertainment or amusement only. These are stories, which carry within them, a philosophy, that that is promoting. And when they are couched in the form of stories and literature, they connect to more people, they go across civilisations, they also go across time.

So, literature has been a very powerful vehicle of philosophy, of ideas of theories. So, just as say, Upanishads are the excerpts, or the extracts of abstract philosophical thinking. And, the Puranas in the Indian tradition, are fleshed out stories, which gives content to these abstract philosophical treaties, which may not be appealing or comprehensible, when seen independently of a story, or a literature framework. So,

when we look at the history, or when we look at stories, or especially stories that have moved. If you look at Panchatantra, Jatakas, all these are stories, which embody a certain philosophy of living, a certain moral value.

And that value comes across from the way, the story is being told. So, literature has a very strong connection with philosophy. And, philosophy uses literature, or literature uses philosophy, as the power to express itself. This particular text is an example of exactly that. So here, the author is talking about, is re-conceptualising the term, Egoism.

This is being re-conceptualised. And what does that mean. That means that well, how do we re-understand Egoism, how do we re-understand, what is selfish, and whether there is something wrong with being selfish or not. Now, coming back to the text. Well, let us say, a very pessimistic view of morality and ethics remained, especially in her times, when they looked as ethics, either as a license to abuse, which caused more harm than benefit, what she talks about in the first point. And then, to do away with that, perhaps the reaction has been to push ethics as a subjective matter, to each his own, as or her own, as I mentioned. And therefore, it just becomes a pleasant conversation, or an intellectual gymnastic activity, at the most.

Not something, which is divorced from the real world, and reality that we exhibit. Now, given this pessimistic background of Ethics, now the author turns around and looks that, what makes values possible. Well, what makes values possible, is a very crucial question. And how one answers that question, will determine, what one holds as going, or how one builds one's worldview or system, that one inhabits.

Well. We will come to the question, and how she answers the question. Now, this text is a treatise. It is an argument, that an author gives. So, she has answered these questions.

These are fundamental questions. And, any philosophical claim, has to answer these questions. Now, she answers it in one way. A way, that has been influential. And, if I may say, has also been the dominant, or at least the sought-after world order, of the current day also.

Right. So, most societies are now, either capitalist societies, or trying to be capitalist societies, or many of them are trying to be. It is a venerable socio-economic order. And it was not so earlier. Right. Of course, there are pockets, and there are various places, where there can be differences.

But, this is a step in the direction of popularising capitalism, as a world economic order.

Right. So now, is there anything rational or irrational about it. That is the question.

Now, let us come back to this question, that she starts with. Well. What are the sources of morality. Whims. Whims, as if well, a saint who has whims, or once just feels that well. If, this is right, that makes it right.

Very often, this whim can be talked as, Emotivism as a moral theory. And, not exactly a theory. Again, as a moral standpoint, which is really not a moral standpoint. It is also known as, the Buhura theory. Well. Where, Emotivists hold that well, there is no such thing as morally right or wrong.

Anything towards which, we feel happy. So, that is a hura, we call it good. And, anything to which, we do not like, or we have an emotional negative reaction, we call it bad. That is the simple way of it. So, this depends nothing.

And, there is nothing intrinsic about good and bad. It is just our emotional reactions to it. So, this is what the, when we talk about whims, as the source of morality. And, very often, we have seen whims, as the source of morality. Revelation. Revelation, when we talk about Revelation, we look at religious revelation, that we look at saints, which claim that, they have a connection to another world order.

And, from where, they are revealed, and they give a conversation, or they give a diktat, and that becomes the source of morality. Metaphysics. Well, metaphysical theories sometimes are seen as a, Physicalism as a Metaphysical Theory. Would look at physical, on a simplistic outlook. Holding a Physicalist Theory, and then looking at Physical Welfare, as the sense of Welfare.

So, Physicalism or Naturalism, that looking at the domain of good and bad, in the natural world framework. So, happiness is something, which is equated to good. So, anything that promotes happiness, becomes good. And therefore, anything that reduces happiness, becomes bad. So, an example of naturalistic metaphysical position, typically what we can find in Utilitarians, becomes an example of, how a moral standpoint is based on metaphysics.

Society. Society, very often becomes tradition, or when there is convention. So, whatever has been the convention, that has been carried out in society, that becomes the moral order to be followed. Then there is of course, Survival Ethics. And, Survival Ethics is typically, if you would say, many modern day TV games, that I see, remind me of Survival Ethics, where survival becomes the benchmark, to decide something that is right or wrong. Say, I am not too familiar with the TV games, but say something, well

okay, if I am not too familiar, I should not perhaps venture into that.

But games, which look at survival, that the survivor as the winner. And, of course, the theory of evolution, which holds that, any practices that promotes a species survival, becomes the right practice. And, any practice that, lessens the chances of a species, or an individual survival, that becomes something bad. So, good and bad, depending on what promotes survival, and what does not promote survival.

Right. Now, the author here talks about, one fundamental point, which is, Mortality. Right. And, here comes to this particular question, that Indestructibility and Mortality. Starts by leaving us with a question, that well, if you were immortal, if you were indestructible, how would your moral framework will vary. Imagine, if you were indestructible, you would not perish, you would not have the fear of death, or you would not have the possibility of death, you were immortal and indestructible.

How would your moral framework change. So, pause for a moment, and think over it. This is a typical example of, how one uses, thought experiments. These are called, thought experiments, to reveal our position to ourselves. So, Philosophers are famous, or even notorious, to use a lot of thought experiments. The critic of which is, that well, these are so far from reality, how does it matter. Say for example, you may have heard of the trolley problem, that if you have the decision to switch a trolley between two alternative tracks, with three people tied on one, and seven people tied on another, what would you decide.

So, how many of us ever face that problem in life. And thankfully, we do not. So, what is the point of talking it. This is the critical, or the sceptical aspect of, thought experiment. But the aim of thought experiment is not to prepare, for a likely circumstance, that may emerge in line with the proposed thought experiment. But it is to, unearth one's own position, that whether, say in the trolley example, whether we value number of lives, over when we have to make a choice, does number matter, does quality matter, does not taking a decision, or not taking responsibility matter. So, now coming to this thought experiment, that Ayn Rand proposes, is that, if we were indestructible, if we were immortal, how would our moral framework change.

So, let us imagine, what would happen, if we were indestructible. So, we would really not be, and if we were immortal, we would not be in a rush, for anything. We would not be afraid of losing, we would not be afraid of perishing, we would not be afraid of going about, and losing our lives, we would not be afraid of so many things. And thereby, I see that, or the author claims that, our mortality is very crucial, to our morality. So, whenever we are mortal, the domain of morality comes into being.

So, mortality and morality are crucially related. Self-destruction as self-contradictory, contrast with, freedom superseding survival. So, when we look at self-destruction, can we look at it as self-contradictory. And so, maybe we typically talk of the case of, suicides or self-harms. Is destroying oneself, self-contradictory.

Or, when one destroys oneself, for a superior cause, does that become valid. Take a moment, to think over it. Take a moment to pause about, how life or our mortality is connected, or generates our morality. The author answers that well, morality is generated by our mortality. So, we will stop for now, and take this further, in the next lecture. Thank you. .