

Moral Thinking: An Introduction To Values And Ethics

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Week - 02

Lecture -13

Reading of Ayn Rand's "The Virtue of Selfishness"

Hello everyone. So today, we are going to read the text, the Objectivist Ethics, as we have discussed earlier. So, we are going to read it, line by line. Let us read it together. I have used three colours of highlights. So, yellow highlight is basically, to denote something which is important.

Pink is something, which can lead to further questions. And blue for something, deep blue highlight, is for ideas that have much deeper ramifications, that can be taken much further. So, stay with me. And let us hope, that we have a fruitful reading together session.

This is a good way to read a text. And I will read it line by line, and pause whenever, there is a need for an explanation. Right. Generally, we do this live. But, I hope even in this staggered recorded session also, it is good for you.

So, the text in hand is, the Objectivist Ethics. Now, let me start by Ayn Rand. Since, I am to speak on the Objectivist Ethics, I shall begin by quoting its best representative, John Galton, Atlas Shrugged. So, now this is the novel, that Ayn Rand wrote, and is quite famous. And this is a quote from, that novel itself.

So, what the author is doing, Ayn Rand is, collating her philosophy from the literature she has written, the stories she has written, to bring out, what is the philosophy she is advocating. Right. I quote, through centuries of scarges and disasters, brought about by your code of morality, you have cried that your code has been broken, that the scarges were punishment for breaking it, that men were too weak, and too selfish to spill all the blood it required. You damned man, you damned existence, you damned this earth, but never dared to question your code. You went on crying that, your code was noble, but human nature was not good enough to practice it.

And no one rose to ask the question, good, by what standard. You wanted to know, John Galt's identity. I am the man, who asked that question. Yes, this is an age of moral crisis. Your moral code has reached its climax, the blind alley at the end of its course.

And if you wish to go on living, what you now need is, not to return to morality, but to discover it. End quote. So, this is a quote from the novel. And, the author is first intimidating tradition. Tradition which looks at a moral code of conduct, for which there has been a lot more suffering than benefit.

So, here, her sceptical trait is started, right at the beginning, with a block, or of the bold tone, that well, the old system of morality want to. So, the question she asks is, what is morality or ethics. It is a code of values, to guide man's choices and actions. The choices and actions, that determine the purpose, and the course of his life. Ethics as a science, deals with discovering and defining such a code.

So, you can see that, the author now, right starts with clarity. And, what is to be appreciated is, the unhesitating and bold ways, she starts making definitions. So, for her, what is morality or ethics. It is a value guide. It is something, the choices that determine the purpose, and the course of his life.

Ethics as a science, deals with discovering and defining such a code. So, that is what the job of Ethics is. Now, coming here. The first question has to be answered, as a precondition of any attempt to define, to judge, or to accept, any specific system of Ethics, is why does man need a code of values. Let me stress this.

The first question is not, what particular code of values should man accept. The first question is, does man need values at all, and why. So, we can see here, a crucial logical step, that before deciding on what, one needs to answer the why question. One should always distinguish between the, what and the why question. The what question is always preceded by the why question.

Always make sure that, we answer the why, before we go on to the what, how questions. Right. This is a philosophical manoeuvre, that the author is taking. Now, is the concept of value, of good or evil, an arbitrary human invention, unrelated to underived from, and unsupported by, any facts of reality. Or, is it based on a metaphysical fact, on an unalterable condition of man's existence.

I use the word metaphysical, to mean the word which pertains to reality, to the nature of things, to existence. Does an arbitrary human convention, a mere custom, decree that

man must guide his actions, by a set of principle. Or, is there a fact of reality, that demands it. Is Ethics, a province of whims, of personal emotions, social edicts, and mystic revelations. Or, is it the province of reason.

Is Ethics, a subjective luxury, or an objective necessity. Now, that is the question, that she is asking. And, intimidating the audience, right at the start, by talking that well, is Ethics, an objective necessity, or a subjective luxury. We have had custom and tradition, by which most of us are governed. If you look at all the value practices, that we hold in our lives, as sacred, or we practice, most of it is inherited.

It comes from tradition, it comes from practice. So, here the author questions, this unquestioned obedience, to conform to practices, which one has come across. And, can these practices be generated, by our own rationality. And this is, where she is coming on to the text. In the sorry record of the history of mankind's ethics, with a few rare and unsuccessful exceptions, Moralists have regarded Ethics, as a province of whims, that is of the irrational.

Some of them did so explicitly, by intention. Others, implicitly by default. A whim is a desire, experienced by a person, who does not know, and does not care to discover its cause. Right. She looks at most of the history of Ethics, as having most of it as, unsuccessful.

And why, because most of it has been regarding Ethics, as the province of whims, that is irrational. Some did so explicitly by intentions, others by default. That means, most of the history of Ethics, has been a history of whims. And then, she goes ahead to explain, what do we understand by a whim. And whim is a desire, experienced by a person, who does not know, and does not care to discover its cause.

No philosopher has given a rational, objectively demonstrable, scientific answer, to the question of, why man needs a code of values. So long as the question remained unanswered, no rational, scientific objective code of Ethics, could be discovered or defined. The greatest of all philosophers, Aristotle, did not regard Ethics, as an exact science. He based his ethical systems, on observations of what the noble, and the wise men of his time, chose to do. Leaving unanswered the questions of, why they chose to do it, and why he evaluated them as noble and wise.

So, this brings forth the crucial question, that instead of knowing what to do, one must first focus on the question, why things need to be done. So, Rand's criticism is that, most of the history of Ethics, has always been about, what to do. Right. The question of, what to do, rather than, why to do, what to do. And she takes a dig at Aristotle, for whom

Ethics has been to abstract, the ethical norms from the behaviour of ideal people.

Right. And, that itself meant that, it is a copycat ethical system. Most philosophers took the existence of Ethics, for granted, as the given, as a historical fact, and were not concerned, with discovering its metaphysical cause, or objective validation. Many of them attempted to break the traditional monopoly of mysticism, in the field of Ethics. And allegedly, to define a rational, scientific, non-religious morality. But, their attempts consisted of trying to justify them on social grounds, nearly substituting society for God.

So, that reality plays a part in Ethics, is something that has been always downplayed, according to the author. And, she talks about various attempts, that tried to break free from this, what she calls, traditional monopoly of mysticism. But, they just ended up replacing God, by society. So, all that was powered in the name of God, now started becoming powered in the name of society. The evolved mystics held the arbitrary, unaccountable will of God, as the standard of the good, and as the validation of their Ethics.

The Neo-mystics replaced it, with the good of society, thus collapsing into the circularity of a definition, such as, the standard of the good, is that which is good for society. This meant in logic, and today in worldwide practice, that society stands above any principles of Ethics, since it is the source, standard, and criteria of Ethics. Since, the good is whatever it wills, whatever it happens to assert, as its own welfare and pleasure. This meant that, society may do anything it pleases, since the good is whatever it chooses to do, because it chooses to do it. And, since there is no such entity as society, since society is only a number of individual men, this meant that, some men, the majority, or any gang, that claims to be its spokesman, are ethically entitled to pursue any whims, or any atrocities, they desire to pursue.

While, other men are ethically obliged, to spend their lives, in the service of the gang's desires. Right. So, here, the author takes a dig at, again the phenomena to replace God by society, to look at how society started dictating its values. And, there was no further basis of it, because whatever society said, it became the norm. And again, looking at the whole notion of society, society has no entity, other than a few group of influential individuals.

So, she follows a philosophy of Methodological Individualism, that a group is actually governed by the few select top elite, which determine how society goes. Now, this is also a debate, that can be opened up. the debate between Methodological Individualism, and Methodological Collectivism. That is a society, a collective, in the sense that, different people participate in it. And, they come out, and frame rules, as a joint effort.

Or, it is just a ship, that is steered by the few influential people out there. For the individualists, the few individuals, who steer the ship of society, or who steer the society, are the ones, who make the difference. She takes this particular process. But, there is also a competing alternative, that would say that well, any group decision-making, cannot be seen, or any cohesive group decision-making, is a collective decision, that has influence of all members.

And, anybody can sway it in any direction. So, it is not just a few members, dictating the many. So, this is a Philosophical position, that she takes. This is a point of critique, that can be raised. But anyway, for her, society is just steered by few powerful individuals. And, the dictat of the society, is essentially becomes the dictat of the gang's desires.

This could hardly be called, Rational. Most philosophers have now decided, to declare that, Reason has failed. That Ethics is outside the power of Reason. That no Rational Ethics can ever be defined. And, that in the field of Ethics, in the choice of his values, of his actions, of his pursuits, of his life's goal, man must be guided by something, other than Reason. By what? Faith, instinct, intuition, revelation, feeling, taste, urge, wish, whim.

What are the of these? Today, as in the past, most philosophers agree, that the ultimate standard of Ethics, is whim. They call it, arbitrary postulate, or subjective choice, or emotional commitment. And, the battle is only over the question, or whose whim. Once own, first agree, that the ultimate standard of Ethics, is whim. They call it, arbitrary postulate, or subjective choice, or emotional commitment.

And, the battle is only over the question, or whose whim. Once own society, or the dictators, or gods, whatever else, they may disagree about. Today's moralists agree, that Ethics is a subjective issue. And, that the three things barred from its field are, Reason, Mind, and Reality. So, the author is claiming here, that well, it is only the question of, Ethics has collapsed into being powered by whims only.

And, the real battle only is, whose whims. Whether it is this, Gang's, or this philosophy's whims, or another team's whims. I think, not a philosophy's whims, but one Gang's whims, versus another Gang's whims. And therefore, three things are banned. Because of this nature of grounding Ethics on whims, Reason, Mind, and Reality, seem to be out of the domain.

This is what, she wants to get into it. Okay, coming back to it. If you wonder, why the

world is now collapsing to a lower, and ever lower rung of hell. This is the reason. If you want to save civilisation, it is this premise of modern Ethics.

And of all Ethical history, that you must challenge. To challenge the basic premise of any discipline, one must begin at the beginning. In Ethics, one must begin by asking, what are values. Why does man need them. So, look at the philosophical manoeuvre here.

That trying to look at the foundational questions. This premise needs to be challenged. That, what are values, and why does one need them at all. She goes ahead, and puts her answer, by first problematising the issue, discarding the extent procedure, and now problematising the issue, and now suggesting her answer. Value is that, which one acts to gain or keep.

The concept value is not a primary. It presupposes an answer, to the question of value, to whom, and for what. It presupposes an entity, capable of acting to achieve a goal, in the face of an alternative, where no alternative exists, no goals, and no values are possible. So, simply defining, what value is. And value is not a primary.

That is a crucial claim, that she is making. That value is not a primary. Okay. Now, I quote from Galt's speech again. That is the character of her story. There is only one fundamental alternative in the Universe, existence or non-existence.

And it pertains to a single class of entities, to living organisms. Very simple, very fundamental. That first alternative is, existence versus non-existence.

How does that affect her philosophy. Let us go ahead and see. The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional. The existence of life is not. It depends on a specific course of action.

Matter is indestructible. It changes its forms. But it cannot cease to exist. It is only a living organism, that faces a constant alternative. The issue of life or death. Life is a process of self-sustaining, and self-generated action.

If an organism fails in that action, it dies. Its action element remains. But its life goes out of existence. So, it is only the concept of life, that makes the concept of value possible. It is only a living entity, that things can be good or evil. To make this point fully clear, try to imagine an immoral, indestructible robot.

An entity which moves and acts, but which cannot be affected by anything, which

cannot be changed in any respect, which cannot be damaged, injured, or destroyed. Such an entity, would not be able to have any values. It would have nothing to gain or lose. It could not regard anything, as for or against it, as serving or threatening its welfare, as fulfilling or frustrating its interests.

It could have no interest, or no goals. Only a living entity can have goals, or can originate them. And it is only a living organism, that has the capacity, for self-generated goal-directed action. On the physical level, the functions of all living organisms, from the simplest to the most complex, from the nutritive function in the single cell of an amoeba, to the blood circulation in the body of a man, are actions generated by the organism itself, and directed to us, the maintenance of the organism's life. An organism's life depends on two factors, the material or fuel, which it needs from the outside, and its physical background. And the action of its own body, the action of using the fuel properly, what standards determine, what is proper in this context.

The standard is the organism's life, or that which is required for the organism's survival. So, here, the author is bringing to light a fundamental restriction, that perhaps gets missed out, or does not get the attention that it deserves, in building the value framework. That it is the very fact, that we are alive, and that we can be dead, is the fundamental reason, why we need to value.

So, this is where, she is grounding her moral claim. Right. And then, she again makes a difference between, how plants, animals, and human beings, what are their different tools of survival. No choice is open to an organism, in this issue. That which is required for its survival, is determined by its nature, by the kind of entity it is. Many variations, many forms of adaptation, on its background, are possible to an organism, including the possibility of existing for a while, in a crippled, disabled, or diseased condition.

But, the fundamental alternative of its existence, remains the same. If an organism fails in the basic function required by its nature, if an amoeba's protoplasm stops assimilating food, or if a man's heart stops beating, the organism dies. In a fundamental sense, stillness is the antithesis of life. Life can be kept in existence, only by a constant process of self-sustaining action. The goal of that action, the ultimate value to be kept, must be gained, through its every moment in the organism's life. An ultimate value, is the final goal, or end, to which all lesser goals are the means.

And, it sets the standard, by which all lesser goals are evaluated. An organism's life is its standard of value. That which furthers its life, is good. And, that which threatens, it is the evil. .