

## CAN ETHICS BE TAUGHT?

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Ethics can be simply defined as what is right and what is wrong. The word **ETHICS** derives from the Greek word *ethos*, which means 'habits' or 'customs' (Fieser, 2009). According to Day (2006), ethics is a moral philosophy that is necessary for the well-being of human lives. It is a set of principles that are emphasized on culturally what is accepted, and what is not.

Philosophy has identified three types of ethics:

- (1) Meta-ethics, which is the study of the characteristics of ethics,
- (2) Normative ethics, which is defined as the development of theories and principles, and
- (3) Applied ethics, which focuses on the aspects of problem solving.

The history of ethics can be traced back to the ancient Greek's time, as Socrates described, "*people will naturally do good provided them what is right, and people are aware of their actions that will be resulted with happiness*" (The basics of philosophy, 2008). However, the ultimate question is whether this ethics, which is naturally inherent to us humans (even in animals that are often seen) can be taught? Ethics are important to create morally responsible individuals (arguably). Going back to the Socrates statements on ethics, where he pointed out that, ethics is about knowing what is right and what is wrong, and this knowledge can be taught to another person. Before jumping in to a concrete answer to the question whether ethics can be taught, there are some factors that are worth looking into.

According to psychology, a person's behaviour can be influenced by intrinsic, extrinsic factors, his/her's moral perceptual abilities, and judgments. When a child is born into a particular society/culture, numerous ethical values and reasons are being cultivated into the child's mind, hoping that one day it may lead to moulding a morally good person. These actions are made by the people in that culture/society, or religion such as caretakers, parents, teachers, or any other individual that have the authority to directly or indirectly influence the child's behaviour. As a result, the cultivated behaviours then automatically become culturally accepted (in many cases) regardless having a conscious rational understanding of its consequences. This is highly evident, when the question was asked, "why stealing is wrong?" from a pre-schooler, the child may reply "because my parents said so", or due to the fear of physical punishment. During this age, the brain is not well developed to comprehend the rationality of why stealing is wrong. However, with maturity, adolescence will develop a better understanding on performing an

inappropriate behaviour such as stealing, and the rational consequences behind it. Why it is wrong? What will happen to me? Or even, should I do this? He or she may question much further.

An influential psychologist L. Kohlberg explained that, knowing what is right and what is wrong does not develop instantaneously. During development, an individual may acquire behaviours that are ethically right (or wrong), but those behaviours will get modified over time. According to Kohlberg (1971), moral values develop in three stages, First, the pre-convention stage, when what is right or wrong is defined based on the presence of an authority figure, as explained earlier by the actions of a pre-schooler. Second, the conventional stage develops as a result of group faithfulness, (such as to the family and friends) based on respect, fear of being an outcast, and what has been taught. Third, in the post-conventional stage, adults may look into the universal acceptance on what is right and what is wrong.

These gradual changes occur as a result of an observational learning process that happens from interpersonal interactions in the society. It is important to understand that knowing ethics, which were taught by another person or by the society per se does not warrant an individual to be ethical. Although ethics are taught in our present society from the time of our birth, understanding the rationale behind these ethics changes over time. These changes can result in laying the foundation to what I call '*personal ethics*', that could be in-line or deviate from the learnt societal ethics. A great deal of importance can be attached to this personal ethics, and it should not be forgotten that much of these personal ethics are a transformation of the previous learnt ethics.



Above diagram illustrates the socially acceptable behavior, which is the intersection between learnt ethics and personal ethics.

Personal Ethics derive from learnt ethics. Which means, a person learns the initial right and wrong from the society, from the significant others, while conceptualizing and constructing his or her's own set of values from what was learnt. From adolescence period onward, children are more inclined to experiment with their own personal ethics. However, gradually these individuals outgrow any discrepancies faced between personal and learnt ethics, and position themselves on a

<sup>1</sup>Personal Ethics derives from the learnt ethics. Which means, a person learns the initial right and wrong from the society and the significant others, while conceptualizing his own understanding what was learnt. From adolescence period onwards, children are more inclined to experiment with their personal ethics. However, with the correct learning mechanisms, individuals outgrow any discrepancy between personal and learnt and lay on a balance middle ground satisfying both social and personal beliefs.

balanced middle ground satisfying both social and personal beliefs (supporting socially acceptable ethical behaviours).

Thus, based on this notion I can say "yes", ethics can be taught. Nevertheless, ethics can also be learned through observations. This will in time again lay the foundation of creating personal ethics, in order to become an ethically acceptable, morally responsible individual. As abstract it may sound, in a broader point of view, ethics can be taught; but, at the same time, it cannot be simply taught expecting a positive outcome from that individual. Only with the right balance between learnt and personal ethics can produce the socially acceptable ethical behaviours. Thus, I present the reader with the notion that ethics is simply not what is right; but rather, it's the dilemma between what is right and wrong.

Ethics acts as a moral guideline in our lives. It guides us through our decision-making process. It promotes analytical skills and rational thinking, making us aware of the consequences of the decisions that are being made. In addition, it helps us to recognize the ethical issues enabling us to see things from a different perspective, so that we can make ethical judgments by defending or criticizing it. We tend to make desperate decisions when we are in desperate situations. The current societal affairs have plenty of examples for this which I will not get into.

So, overall yes, ethics can be taught. Ethics can be viewed as a type of knowledge and knowledge can be taught to others. On the contrary, there are aspects of ethics which could not be taught, but instead it is learned by the individuals through observations, through their own reasoning, their beliefs and also by their own justifications on the matters of what is right and what is wrong. Some forms of ethical behaviours are also innate to us. Could there be a genetic predisposition that activates (what is innate in us) through socially-learned ethics? Whatever it is, we just need to polish-up those ethics as we grow or else it would just be meaningless.

In conclusion, the question I asked whether ethics can be taught can generate numerous answers. Every one of those answers are justifiable in their own sense. There is no clear-cut answer to this question as it is very much of a debatable question. But, with rapid globalization (and decentralization), what can we do to improve the ethical behaviours of our future generations? Something to ponder...