

General morality, personal and professional ethics

What constitutes Ethics?

The Dictionary definition of 'ethics' is that it is the science of morals; - 'a set of moral principles of human duty; guiding principles or rules of virtuous human conduct'. 'Morality' is that which is concerned with character, distinction between right and wrong; virtuous and righteous thoughts and actions'. Morally courageous conduct, for example, is the courage to encounter contempt, persecution, fear, and personal loss/suffering and adhering to the right course of action. Ethical code of conduct or morality is thus a set of principles/ rules of conduct based on human virtues considering our responsibility to fellow humans, society, animals and environment for the wellbeing of all, and for sustainability.

General Morality

Human civilizations evolved in different parts of the world at different times, and these

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set their standards of morality. Communities depending on their circumstances modified and adapted their own particular set of rules of conduct. Religions had a profound influence on setting standards of general morality. Village and tribal chiefs, kings, emperors and various socio-political organizations influenced general morality from time to time. In the modern era communism, capitalism and liberalism have also made their impacts. So 'general morality' is not standard and universal.

For example, in some communities child marriage is allowed and in many it is not accepted. In some communities widows are not allowed to marry, whereas most modern societies encourage widow re-marriage. Homosexuality is an example of permissiveness in some modern societies.

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Alcohol is taboo for some societies, but social drinking is considered as a mark of respectability in some societies. Vegetarians (based on their religious belief) abhor meat eating. Some communities based on their religious beliefs ban eating certain type of meat, where as some religions consider 'Ahimsa' as an important virtue, and prohibit all types of cruelty and injury to all living beings. Some communities based on their religious beliefs, have developed devotion and respect for nature and environment and this is imbibed into their set of morals.

General morality appears to be diverse from community to community and place to place, although there is a great convergence with respect to the fundamentals. All religions advise human beings to be good natured and pure in thought and action and be 'God like'. The fundamental moral codes of conduct are really secular and are of virtuous commonsense values. Good personal ethics are developed on the basis of these secular codes.

Personal ethics

These are based on individual's beliefs. Of course it has a bearing on general morality, the religion, community, and socio-political affiliations of the individual. Parents, teachers, and friends have a strong influence on the individual in defining and developing personal ethics.

Human beings have a divine nature. The divinity within manifests in the form of good and virtuous thoughts and acts. Honesty, integrity love, compassion, respect for nature and environment, humility, moral courage,

universal brotherhood and universal wellbeing etc are some of the divine qualities embedded in the human mind, which when nurtured form the basis of good personal ethics. Some believe in the 'inner voice', the voice of one's conscience and live by that voice. What is right and what is wrong is decided by these individuals by listening to this 'inner voice'.

Professional ethics

These are moral code of conduct as applicable to persons belonging to a particular profession in the practice of that profession. A profession is a vocation in which a person has acquired knowledge/skill/training/qualification and is engaged in its application. A professional, while practicing one's profession is expected to add value to society in the form of knowledge, technology, products, services etc. Professionals are empowered with knowledge, skills and training in providing such value addition. This empowerment can be misused, adversely affecting the well-being of others, society and environment. Hence professionals need to be regulated by ethical/moral standards. These form codes of professional ethics, and need to be defined separately for each type of profession, although the underlying principle of well-being of all, the society, and the environment is the same. Professional codes of ethics are generally promulgated by each of the professional societies, and sometimes by the State laws.

Interrelations and conflicts

It is essential to be an ethical person, as well as an ethical professional. While general ethics and personal ethics form the basis for

professional ethics, there are subtle differences. General morality/ethics are applicable to a particular community. Personal ethics are applicable to individuals in their private/and in public life and may not be fully applicable in their professional career. There could be conflicts between the personal ethics and professional ethics, as the former is based on individual beliefs & wisdom, where as the latter is based on standards of morality accepted by a professional community, and is binding on all those belonging to that profession. So a professional has to learn to differentiate between the two and act in accordance with professional ethics. Some examples of situations when there is a conflict between personal ethics and professional ethics are given below:

Budhadev is an engineer. He joined the Defense Research & Development Organization and was assigned to work on a project involved in the design and development of a long range missile. His personal ethics, which also have a basis on his religion, forbid him from causing injury to any living being, directly or indirectly. Professional ethics, as a design engineer employed and paid by an organization involved in design of weapons demands him to carry out his profession with commitment. His supervisor counsels him, knowing his personal ethics, and assures that India being a peaceful country will not attack any, but the missile will be used during war for defense against the attackers. What should Budhadev do?

Mr. Narayan has been brought up with the virtue of absolute honesty embedded in him from childhood. After his graduation, he joined a consulting firm. One of Narayan's friends is employed in the marketing department of another firm. He asks Narayan for some information on consultancy work done for one of the clients of Narayan's employer. According to Mr. Narayan's personal ethics he must tell the truth and also help his friend. As per his professional ethics, he must maintain confidentiality with respect to information about the clients. What should he do?

Joseph is working in a factory in charge of procurements of tools. John an engineer and one of his intimate friends, is also employed in the same firm as the shop in charge. One day, John tells him that a number of tools he had purchased through Joseph were not immediately needed for the shop, but are being used by John for his house constructions, and will return these for the shop later. He thanked Joseph for helping him indirectly and tells him to keep the information confidential. Joseph knows that it is against the company's code of conduct to use the company's property for personal work, unless specifically approved. It is also against the code of conduct for professionals to misuse their powers for personal gains. But his personal ethics demands maintaining confidentiality about his friend's action, especially as he has told him the truth voluntarily, putting total trust in him. What shall Joseph do? A breach of trust with his friend or a non-compliance with his professional code of conduct?

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Rajendran is an engineer working for a civil engineering construction company. He has been given special training by his employer in the design and construction of dams. His firm has won a contract for a large dam across a river which causes flooding each rainy season; and yet provides no water for the farmers during the summer as the river has little water. The dam will arrest floods, and retain water for irrigation, and also will be used for a hydroelectric project for power generation. It will help a large farming community, down river with water for farming and with rural electrifications. But there are a lot of environmentalists working against the project. Rajendran learns from them and the media, of the considerable misery to the tribal people near the dam who will have to relocate. Also it will submerge a good portion of forest land destroying flora and fauna. Rajendran's personal ethics are against causing harm to the environment and misery to people. He does not want to be instrumental in causing misery to the tribal people and to the destruction of the flora, & fauna, even though the dam project will bring prosperity to the large farming rural community down river. His professional ethics as a civil engineer specialized in dams require him to work with commitment to his profession. What should Rajendran decide?

Most of the time there will be convergence as most of the standard provisions of ethical professional codes for professionals, are derived from secular general morality. Hence it may be noted that it is rare that professional and personal ethics and general morality will be convergence as most of the standard provisions of ethical

professional codes for professionals are derived from secular general morality. A deeper and unbiased analysis can restore such apparent conflicts.

Note: Readers may look for in the second issue of the journal where an analysis of the above stated conflicts and more case studies on conflicts and resolution by the same Author.

Five guiding Principles of JRD TATA:

- *Nothing worthwhile is ever achieved without deep thought and hard work*
- *One must think for oneself and never accept at their face value slogans and catch phrases to which, unfortunately, our people are too easily susceptible*
- *One must forever strive for excellence, or even perfection, in any task however small, and never be satisfied with the second best*
- *No success or achievement in material terms is worthwhile unless it serves the needs or*