THEORIES ABOUT RIGHT ACTION (ETHICAL THEORIES)

2.11.1 Uses and Criteria
The ethical theories are useful in many respects.
1. In understanding moral dilemma. They provide clarity, consistency, systematic and comprehensive understanding.
2. It provides helpful practical guidance in moral issues towards the solution.
3. Justifying professional obligations and decisions, and
3. In relating ordinary and professional morality.
Different criteria may be applied for evaluating various ethical theories and deciding upon the best.
1. The theory must be clear and (coherent) formulated with concepts that are logically connected.
2. It must be internally consistent, i.e., none of its principles conflicts with any other
3. The theory and its defense must depend, only upon facts.
4. It must organize basic moral values in systematic and comprehensive manner. It is to fix priority of values and provide guidance in all situations
5. It must provide guidance compatible with our moral convictions (judgments) about concrete situations. For example, if an ethical theory says that it is all right for engineers to make explosive devices without the informed consent of the public, we can conclude that the theory is inadequate.
Theories and judgments are continually adjusted to each other until we reach a reflective equilibrium. Most of the theories converge towards the welfare of the humanity. The duty ethics and right ethics differ in great extent on their emphasis. But they remain complementary always.

2.11.2 Ethical Theories/Approaches
Several ethical theories have been developed over different times, each of them stressing certain ethical principles or features. Each stresses a view and many a times, we find that these theories converge and reinforce the ethics, in deciding upon the actions and justifying the results.

1. Utilitarian Theory
The term Utilitarianism was conceived in the 19th century by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill to help legislators determine which laws were morally best. They suggested that the standard of right conduct is maximization of good consequences. Good consequences mean either ‘utilities’ or the ‘balance of good over evil’. This approach weighs the costs and benefits. Right actions are the ones that produce the greatest benefits and the least harm. The ethical action is the one that provides the greatest good for the greatest number.
The ACT UTILITARIAN theory proposed by J.S. Mill (1806-73) focuses on actions, rather than on general rules. An action is right, if it generates the most overall good for the most people involved. The RULE UTILITARIAN theory, developed by Richard Brandt (1910-97), stressed on the rules, such as ‘do not steal’, ‘do no harm others’, ‘do not bribe’, as of primary importance. He suggested that individual actions are right when they are required by set of rules which maximizes the public good.
The act utilitarian theory permitted a few immoral actions. Hence, there was need to develop rule utilitarian theory to establish morality and justice, in the transactions. For example, stealing an old computer from the employer will benefit the employee more than the loss to the employer. As per Act, utilitarian this action is right. But rule utilitarian observes this as wrong, because the employee should act as ‘faithful agent or trustee of the employees’. In another example, some undisciplined engineers are terminated with the blame for the mistakes they have not committed. The process is unfair although this results in promotion of overall good.

2. Duty Ethics
A. The duty ethics theory, proposed by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) states, that actions are consequences of performance of one’s duties such as, ‘being honest’, ‘not cause suffering of others’, ‘being fair to others including the meek and week’, ‘being grateful’, ‘keeping promises’ etc. The stress is on the universal principle of respect for autonomy i.e., respect and rationality of persons. As per Kant we have duties to ourselves, as we are rational and
autonomous beings. We have a duty not to commit suicide; a duty to develop our talents and a duty to avoid harmful drugs. Kant insisted that moral duties are categorical imperatives. They are commands that we impose on ourselves as well as other rational beings. For example, we should be honest because honesty is required by duty. A businessman is to be honest because honesty pays — in terms of profits from customers and from avoiding jail for dishonesty.

B. On the other hand, the DUTY ethics theory, as enunciated by John Rawl, gave importance to the actions that would be voluntarily agreed upon by all persons concerned, assuming impartiality. His view emphasized the autonomy each person exercises in forming agreements with other rational people. Rawl proposed two basic moral principles; (1) each person is entitled to the most extensive amount of liberty compatible with an equal amount for others, and (2) differences in social power and economic benefits are justified only when they are likely to benefit every one, including members of the most disadvantaged groups. The first principle is of prime importance and should be satisfied first. Without basic liberties other economic or social benefits can not be sustained for long. The second principle insists that to allow some people with great wealth and power is justified only when all other groups are benefited. In the business scenario, for example, the free enterprise is permissible so far it provides the capital needed to invest and prosper, thereby making job opportunities to the public and taxes to fund the government spending on the welfare schemes on the poor people.

C.W.D. Ross, the British philosopher introduced the term prima facie duties, which means duties might have justified exceptions. In fact, most duties are prima facie ones; some may have obligatory or permissible exceptions. Ross assumed that the prima facie duties are intuitively obvious (self-evident), while fixing priorities among duties. He noted that the principles such as ‘Do not kill’ and ‘protect innocent life’ involve high respect for persons than other principles such as, ‘Do not lie’ (less harmful). This theory is criticized on the fact, that the intuitions do not provide sufficient guideline for moral duty. He has listed various aspects of Duty Ethics that reflect our moral convictions, namely:
1. Fidelity : duty to keep promises.
2. Reparation : duty to compensate others when we harm them.
3. Gratitude : duty to thank those who help us.
4. Justice : duty to recognize merit.
5. Beneficence : duty to recognize inequality and improve the condition of others.
7. Non-malfeasance : duty not to injure others.

3. Rights Theory
Rights are entitlement to act or to have another individual act in a certain way. Minimally, rights serve as a protective barrier, shielding individuals from unjustified infringement of their moral agency by others. For every right, we have a corresponding duty of noninterference.

A. The RIGHTS approach to ethics has its roots in the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant, who focused on the individual’s right to choose for oneself. According him, what makes human beings different from mere things is, that people have dignity based on their ability to choose freely what they will do with their lives, and they have a fundamental moral right to have these choices respected. People are not objects to be manipulated; it is a violation of human dignity to use people in ways they do not freely choose. Other rights he advocated are:
1. The right to access the truth: We have a right to be told the truth and to be informed about matters that significantly affect our choices.
2. The right of privacy: We have the right to do, believe, and say whatever we choose in our personal lives so long as we do not violate the rights of others.
3. The right not to be injured: We have the right not to be harmed or injured unless we freely and knowingly do something to deserve punishment or we freely and knowingly choose to risk such injuries.
4. The right to what is agreed: We have a right to what has been promised by those with whom we have freely entered into a contract or agreement.

B. In deciding whether an action is moral or immoral, we must ask, does the action respect the moral rights of everyone? Actions are wrong to the extent that they violate the rights of
individuals; the more serious is the violation, the more wrongful is the action. The RIGHTS
theory as promoted by John Locke states that the actions are right, if they respect human
rights of every one affected. He proposed the three basic human rights, namely life, liberty,
and property. His views were reflected in the modern American society, when Jefferson
declared the basic rights as life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.
C. As per A.I. Melden’s theory based on rights, nature mandates that we should not harm
others’ life, health, liberty or property. Melden allowed welfare rights also for living a
decent human life. He highlighted that the rights should be based on the social welfare
system.
D. Human rights: Human rights are explained in two forms, namely liberty rights and welfare
rights. Liberty rights are rights to exercise one’s liberty and stresses duties on other people
not to interfere with one’s freedom. The four features of liberty rights (also called moral
rights), which lay the base for Government Administration, are:
1. Rights are natural in so far as they are not invented or created by government.
2. They are universal, as they do not change from country to country.
3. They are equal since the rights are the same for all people, irrespective of caste,
race, creed or sex.
4. They are inalienable i.e., one cannot hand over his rights to another person such as
selling oneself to slavery.
The Welfare Rights are the rights to benefit the needy for a decent human life, when one can
not earn those benefits and when those benefits are available in the society.
E. Economic rights: In the free-market economy, the very purpose of the existence of the
manufacturer, the sellers and the service providers is to serve the consumer. The consumer is
eligible to exercise some rights. The consumers’ six basic rights are: Right to Information,
Right to Safety, Right to Choice, Right to be Heard, Right to Redressal, and Right to Consumer
Education.
A few rights are absolute, i.e., unlimited and have no justifiable exceptions. For example, rights
ethicists view that the rights have not been violated if the people purchase a (technological product)
hang glider and they get injured by flying them carelessly or under bad weather conditions. But human
rights imply that one not to be poisoned or killed by technological products, whose dangers are not
obvious or wantonly hidden. They imply a right to be informed, when the purchase was made, of the
possible dangers during use or service (obtaining informed consent).
Rights ethics is distinctive in that it makes human rights the ultimate appeal — the moral bottom
line. Human rights constitute a moral authority to make legitimate moral demands on others to respect
our choices, recognizing that others can make similar claims on us. Thus, we see that the rights ethics
provides a powerful foundation for the special ethical requirements in engineering and other professions.

4. The Virtue Theory
This emphasizes on the character rather than the rights or duties. The character is the pattern of virtues
(morally-desirable features). The theory advocated by Aristotle, stressed on the tendency to act at
proper balance between extremes of conduct, emotion, desire, attitudes to find the golden mean between
the extremes of ‘excess’ or ‘deficiency’. The examples shown below illustrate the theory:

Virtue Excess Golden mean Deficient
Truthfulness (governs Revealing all in Necessary and Secretive
communication) violation of tact sufficient, to
and confidentiality proper person
Courage (face danger, risk) Roguishness, bold Firm and humble Cowardice
Generosity (giving) Wasting resources Give, in appropri- Miserly
ate measure
Friendliness (governs Without anger, Within decent Bad-tempered
relationship) effusive limits
Green environment Exploitation Protection Neglect
Work and earn Tiresome work Balance of work Lazy (no work)
(strained) and leisure and more pay

On the other hand, the Virtue Theory proposed by Mac Intyre, highlighted on the actions aimed
at achieving common good and social (internal) good such as social justice, promotion of health,
creation of useful and safe technological products and services. Five types of virtues that constitute
responsible professionalism, namely public-spirited virtues, proficiency virtues, team-work virtues,
self-governance virtues, and cardinal virtues are discussed in # 2.10.3.
5. Self-realisation Ethics
Right action consists in seeking self-fulfillment. In one version of this theory, the self to be realized is defined by caring relationships with other individuals and society. In another version called ethical egoism, the right action consists in always promoting what is good for oneself. No caring and society relationships are assumed.

6. Justice (Fairness) Theory
The justice or fairness approach to ethics has its roots in the teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who said that “equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally.” The basic moral question in this approach is: How fair is an action? Does it treat everyone in the same way, or does it show favoritism and discrimination?
Issues create controversies simply because we do not bother to check the fairness or justice. Favoritism gives benefits to some people without a justifiable reason for singling them out; discrimination imposes burdens on people who are no different from those on whom burdens are not imposed. Both favoritism and discrimination are unjust and wrong.