Chapter 7
Religious Ethics, General Ethics, and Engineering Ethics:
A Reflection

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this chapter is to examine the underpinning relation among religious ethics, general ethics, and engineering ethics. We, the human beings, belong to one religion or the other by birth and/ or by practice. There is hardly any society that is non-religious, and every major religion has religion-based ethics. Every evolved religion promotes values such as honesty, truthfulness, nonviolence, helping the needy, etc. These values are developed by major religions, such as Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. All these values together constitute our understanding about general ethics. Fortunately, many religions prescribe similar values, and these values are considered as general ethics, which the chapter delineates in detail. The chapter also elucidates why we have not considered agnostics' and atheists' views on religious ethics even if general ethical principles are based on religious ethics. Further, what is the need to have professional ethics such as engineering ethics when we already have religious and general ethics? The chapter argues "engineering ethics" as a professional ethics would be an autonomous system and would be independent of religious ethics and general ethics. The reason for this claim is professionals need to perform their duties in accordance with their professional codes of conduct, and not based on their religious ethics or general ethics. The chapter submits that engineering ethics is an autonomous ethics even if it has values that resemble religious or general ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists have not found any tribe that has no religion. Religion and language constitute social institution. Institutions are governed by norms, and norms are treated as values. This amounts to saying that we have not found any society without norms and religion. Thus, there is nothing to surprise if we find societies practicing religious ethics. In India, we have Hindu ethics, Christian ethics and Muslim ethics to name a few. Centuries together, these religion-based ethics have been in

practice by individuals, if not all, at least religious followers. In the ancient times, it was observed that religious ethics were neither exhaustive nor adequate to perform each and every task, especially a professional task. So, along with religious ethics societies were expecting professionals to practice professional ethics. Professionals were expected to serve the society as a whole, and not a few religious groups. Thus, it is advocated that professionals should stick to their code of ethics when they engage in their professional tasks. In India, we find "business ethics" that is enshrined in Arthashastra[1] and Manusmriti,[2] medical ethics in Caraka Samhita (Loon, 2002 & 2003). Further, ethics are also found in the Gita,[3] e.g. nishkamakarma[4] and varnashrama dharma.[5] Pancatantra (Lechner, 2003) also teaches ethical norms through stories. Furthermore, we find ethics of Jainism and Buddhism with comparable practices. All these ethical documents have religious and metaphysical foundations. These norms are meant for Hindu society, unlikely to be appreciated by other societies. For instance, "duty" based on *varna* and *ashrama* will not be acceptable to the members of non-Hindu societies. But imparting professional knowledge need not be restricted to any caste or community.

Like any other religion, one could find an outline of Christian ethics in Bible. One among others is to work six days in a week and take rest on Sunday (Cunningham, 2008, pp. 233–35). For Christians all actions are moral actions, as a very insignificant action as judged by us might turn out to be an important action from a moral point of view (Cunningham, 2008, p. 25). Without the provision to evaluate which action is moral and which is morally neutral, life would become quite tough for individuals. Christian Ethics also has a stand on divorce. Catholics do not generally permit divorce. Similarly, they do not approve homosexuality as well (Adair, 2007, p. 706). These ethical norms are based on Christian ethics. Bible is the main source of Christian Ethics.

The major sins recognized in Islam are killing human beings, adultery, not performing the Hajj, drinking alcohol, theft, gambling, suicide, telling lies, bribery, etc. Homosexuality is not permitted in Islam (Birgivi, 2005, p. 305). Certain disciplines are enforced on the followers. They are supposed to pray five times facing Mecca every day wherever they are in the world. Adopting the method of birth control is going against the wish of the God. Rispler-Chaim (1989) claims that the main sources of ethics are Quran, the Hedith the oral tradition as transmitted by companions of Mohammad and the Sharia Islamic law developed by jurists on the basis of Quran and Hedith. If there is any difficulty in getting the answer to the moral issue, one needs to go back to the Quran and solve the problem (pp. 203–204). Medical professionals too are supposed to treat the patients without going against the ethics of Islam.

SECULAR ETHICS

We do find several attempts that have been made historically to provide secular foundation of ethics. We may mention some of them. Socratic or that of Aristotle's ethics can be considered secular ethics. Socrates claimed that if one knows what is good, (s)he would act in a just manner. Given this innate good nature of a human being, it is inevitable for an individual to act in a virtuous manner provided (s)he knows what is good. But an individual can be ignorant about what is good. This general claim that virtue is the knowledge of the good does not help much in the professional context. Aristotle's ethics avoids extremes and preaches the middle path, and human beings must act with least effort morally once if they know what the right action is. In order to achieve this, habit formation becomes necessary. Virtue thus becomes dispositional. The goal of a human being is happiness according to Aristotle. Every virtue he recommends, such as

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