

MORAL SCEPTICISM

The problem and issues raised by moral scepticism are indeed more complex than those of epistemological scepticism though there are a number of assumptions and approaches which are common to both. That it must be the case need not surprise any of us because any sceptical theory is grounded in certain mistrusts and doubts and consequent denial or non-acceptance of objectivity in its respective domain. Scepticism as a method in general denies any logical connection between truth of any belief and how we arrive at it. In the context of morality scepticism often results from a frustrating belief concerning irresolvable differences regarding values, norms and obligations which are deemed to have no relation with questions of logic and facts. Whereas in majority of the cases epistemological scepticism leads to moral scepticism (Hume, in my view, is of course an exception), a moral sceptic may with ease refuse to commit himself to the former. In other words, one may doubt objective moral truths without in the least doubting the possibility of our knowledge of the external world in particular and that of empirical knowledge in general. Scepticism in ethics arises out of a realization of the futility of any attempt to justify moral judgements or arguments.

Though moral scepticism, in the final analysis, may generally arrive at some particular and definite conclusions, various grounds and reasons individually or severally are found to have supported its emergence. In what follows I may venture to state

some familiar bases of moral scepticism without of course claiming their exclusive nature. Some of these grounds may only indirectly suggest that moral scepticism is the only proper approach as far as the notions of 'right', 'duty', 'good' etc., are concerned. Besides, it may also be found that some of these either reinforce one another or they mutually overlap in countering the alleged claims of moral knowledge and moral objectivity. Therefore, after having stated some of the possible grounds of moral scepticism, I will briefly discuss them without every time neatly indicating the relevance or applicability of a specific point to any particular ground. In the development of moral scepticism it may be seen that suspicion against both reason and the senses has encouraged one on the path of scepticism.

a) Of the possible grounds of moral scepticism moral relativism stands out as one of the most congenial attitudes. Moral relativism may be given two interpretations. One may be described as the *general theory of moral relativity* and the other, the *specific theory of moral relativity*. By the former I mean the view that moral values and obligations are relative to general human situations, needs and desires. These in turn may be seen in the context of various cultural, historical and economic conditions. The moral space within which values, rights and obligations find their legitimate expression includes both physical (i.e., geographical) and temporal (i.e., historical) spaces. Understanding and appreciation of different societies and their cultures have always been found to be significant in the correct appraisal and appraisal of moral ideals. By the specific theory of moral relativity, I mean the standpoint that moral values are dependent on the individual's unique and specific situation and any agreement and community of approaches concerning values and obligations are incidental, never necessary—nor even common. This may be briefly expressed as a vulgarised version of Pro-

tagoras' well known dictum : ' (Individual) man is the measure of all things '.

b) The second fertile ground for moral scepticism has been subjectivism of one form or the other. This school of thought has been so much discussed and debated that each and every possible argument and counter-argument, for or against it, is known to every student of ethics. From the days of Hume to those of Ayer, Stevenson or Edwards a number of variations have been brought about on the theme of subjectivism. What is common to all forms of subjectivism is the relation between ethical predicates and our feelings, emotions and sentiments. The two major forms of subjectivism, known as old and new subjectivism, differ on the point of its acceptance or rejection of the view whether this relation can or cannot be expressed in a propositional form. In other words, the bone of contention between the two is whether the subjective nature of ethical terms can be objectively asserted. Another variation has been in terms of what is sometimes called social subjectivism and individual subjectivism. It is mainly the latter forms of the two above-stated variations, viz., non-propositional form of ethical judgements and individual subjectivism, which may be considered to have been quite conducive to moral scepticism. If this is so, one of the greatest advocates of scepticism, Hume, would be counted out of the list of the votaries of moral scepticism. I will, however, say something more regarding Hume's position a little later.

c) A third factor which seem to be a favourable point in support of scepticism is the view that there is no possibility of a reasoned or rational decision in morals. This is generally taken to be a corollary of subjectivism whereby 'good' or 'right' refers to any situation or action one likes. And this is precisely what 'good' or 'right' means. If moral judgement are assigned

infallibility or incorrigibility, they obviously move out of the domain of rational arguments or rational decisions.

d) Finally, I will refer to one more point which is also considered to be congenial to moral scepticism. It has often been admitted that the question 'Why something is the ultimate end or value?' or 'What is the proof of the highest value?' or 'Why one ought to do one's duty?' or any other formulation of such a question is unanswerable. There is a list of important thinkers arrayed behind such a move. Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Moore or Hare are but some of them who have in one sense or the other adopted such a stance. But this can be given an illegitimate extension by suggesting that the above question is only in disguise the same as the question, 'Is anything right at all?' And if the former set of questions is unanswerable, the latter is also unanswerable. But the assertion concerning there being unanswerable can be made out to be only a rhetorical way of saying that the answer is 'No'. Hence moral scepticism.

Now let us briefly discuss the above mentioned views and positions in order to see whether they are tenable and whether moral scepticism necessarily follows from them.

a) Talking of moral relativism in general, it would be of some interest to see how did relativism assume the position of having bred moral scepticism. The road to scepticism from relativism however often passes through the labyrinth of subjectivism. The standpoint of relativism apparently owes its origin to the reaction against, and the consequent denial of, the moral absolutes. That there are moral truths which are absolute was embedded in an extreme form of rationalism which would grant rationality to morals primarily on the condition that there are *a priori* moral truths. Besides, objectivity of moral judgements was supposed to hang on the peg of moral absolutes. Thus, moral relativity came to mean not only the negation of absolute moral values

but also the denial of moral objectivity. Though mistakenly, often the streams of moral relativism and subjectivism are deemed to flow on the same bed. Religion and theology have also taken sides with the admission of absolute truths in ethics. Divine commands for divine goodness could easily guarantee eternal and absolute values and virtues which could survive the vicissitudes of time and could stand solidly as the sheet anchor of human perfection and morality. Any theory which militates against moral absolutism, both in terms of absolute values/commands and absolute knowledge, could easily fall in disrepute in the heyday of rationalism and was probably charged with sceptical ideas. In other words, relativism came to be treated as an ally, if not the progenitor, of scepticism. It has also often been argued that relativisation of moral truths tantamounts to the denial of moral justification and reasoning and, thus, to the denial of moral knowledge. But it does not require any aggressive argumentation to show that such a conclusion is *non sequitur*. As has been referred to above, if such an approach has any applicability, it is only in respect of what I have called the specific theory of moral relativity, not of the general one. Laws, norms or conventions are not always absolute, though general and universal. They are relative to human nature and situations and yet objectively appropriate and relevant or inappropriate and irrelevant in relation to an age or a society. If the term 'man' in 'man is the measure of all things' is understood in the sense of 'species man' or human beings at large, it does not commit any one to the form of relativism which is conducive to scepticism. It was not only Protagoras who was convinced of his own dictum. Men like Aristotle, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Hume have also upheld the cause of Protagoras in a slightly different vein. For Aristotle, the good man is the measure of what is pleasant and agreeable or painful and disagreeable. For Hume too, the educated man is the measure of

feelings and sentiments on which morality is founded. The role of a benevolent impartial spectator in Hume, as in the Moral Sense School, is to present to our consideration an objective appraisal of what is good or bad, right or wrong. In words of H. D. Aiken,

... our expressions of moral praise or blame are expressions of what such a spectator *would* approve or disapprove rather than what we ourselves actually do feel.¹

The convention of the impartial spectator is accepted by Hume as a way of "correcting our sentiments". The concept of such an observer or spectator is surely not a far cry from Protagoras' 'man'. Of course, it may be said that such an observer is an idealized version of man on whom objective concepts of values are already grafted. But if we remember the conditions and possibility of grafting, the notion of 'ideal observer' can be easily seen to be situated in a socio-cultural context. What it does not show is that moral truths cannot be admitted to be so unless they are eternal and absolute. Of course, if moral truths or values are made out to be specifically function of each individual's conditions and situations without any common criteria and norms, denial of moral knowledge may seem to be inevitable. But such a relativism is as much a philosophical myth as moral absolutism. Even if moral scepticism, born of the specific theory of moral relativity, is held as a theoretical possibility, it can never be maintained at practical level. The form of theoretically viable moral scepticism would ultimately lapse into moral solipsism which hardly any philosopher worth the name has ever maintained. If morality represents a way of life of a people or a society, its being conditioned by the environment and nurture does not take away the objective grounds of moral judgements.

b) Now let us turn to the second important ally of moral scepticism, i e., subjectivism. In one sense, within the domain of

new subjectivism or emotivism the discussion of moral scepticism may be declared quite irrelevant because the non-cognitivist approach to moral judgements puts the point of moral knowledge out of courts. The debate concerning the viability or otherwise of moral scepticism becomes philosophically uninteresting because the nature of moral concepts and judgements is such that they are bound to be subjective expressions and since knowledge is always objective, there is no question of there being any moral knowledge at all. So moral scepticism is an undeniable fact, an incorrigible philosophical position which rules out by definition a counter-position. But let us beware of a trap here. Granting that moral judgements and concepts undeniably refer to feelings, emotions and other psychological phenomena, it does not necessarily follow that there cannot be any objective discourse about morals. Barring those who deny that there are any moral judgements at all, many subjectivists may very well admit that a judgement about subjective phenomena can be objective. A judgement need not be subjective (in the sense required here) simply because it refers to some experience. Subjectivism has indeed a point in asserting a causally necessary connection between our judging something as good, bad, right or wrong and our having certain feelings towards or against it. A Hume's authority on this point may be suspect but a Butler, a Rashdall or a Moore would surely attract attention. Rashdall admits that "the content of our moral judgement is dependent upon the sensitive and emotional as well as the rational nature of man."² Butler is quite well known for his view that conscience partakes of the nature of both the 'sentiment of understanding' and a 'perception of the heart'. Moore, since the publication of *Ethics* (1912) shifted towards the view that "nothing can be an intrinsic good unless it contains both some feeling and some other form of consciousness."³ By the time he writes 'A Reply to my Critics' (1942) he is almost half conve-

ted to emotivism. Recently, Bernard Williams in his 1965 Inaugural lecture at Bedford college entitled 'Morality and the Emotions'⁴ has shown the significance of emotions in morality by indicating how emotions do not just happen to us but are states expressed in action as well as how emotions can function as motives. Against the backdrop of thinkers who are objectivists or ideal utilitarians, Hume's statement sounds a moderate note when he says that "reason and sentiment concur in almost all moral determinations and conclusions" (*Enquiry*, sec. 137). Against "disingenuous disputants" (moral sceptics?) Hume in his *Enquiry* uses vast battery of arguments to assert "the reality of moral distinctions" (Sec. 133). The partial truth of subjectivism is too obvious to be denied. Nor is it necessary! Relation between rightness and feelings and emotions may be accepted as a causal one without any inconsistency. Emotivism goes wide off the mark when it makes this relation logical i.e., true by definition and also insists on its exclusiveness. If the notion of 'truth' at least on some accounts, can be shown to be intimately connected with that of 'belief' and it is deemed to be demanded by the principle of consistency, the same treatment with equal consistency may safely be extended to the notions of 'right'/'good' and those of 'desire' and 'feeling'. If, 'I know that p' or 'p is true' demands 'I believe that p' as a practical/psychological correlate by way of assenting to p, 'p is good/right' may equally and in the same manner demand 'I like/approve of p'. Nowell-Smith's 'contextual implication' and 'logical oddness' are not merely his personal idiosyncrasy. Similarly, the contrast between theoretical and practical reasoning need not be a fertile ground for moral scepticism. Nevertheless, to the extent that subjectivism or emotivism refuses to accept the above mentioned implications, and denies any possibility of interpersonal objectivity or the intersubjective context of moral judgements, it does facilitate the rise of moral scepticism. In later Wittgenstein and

the post emotivist writers like Toulmin, Hare and Nowell-Smith, there are clear indications of the intersubjective truths and acceptability of moral judgements without necessarily taking sides with full-blooded objectivism or subjectivism.

c) The denial of the possibility of rational arguments and that of giving reasons in support of decisions in ethics has generally been favoured by every moral sceptic. This is one of the most widely discussed problem during last four decades though it has been the subject of ethical reflection since Socratic times and found its first proper systematic treatment in Aristotle. Aristotle in fact anticipated Hume when he said that the unqualified (pure ?) understanding by itself moves nothing but as practical understanding, i.e., when it is purposive and aims at an end, it can cause movement (*NE*, 1139a and 1146a). Moreover, in his analysis of choice which originates action, he talks of the unity of understanding and desire (Hume's 'reason and sentiment'). He talks of the 'desiderative reason' and 'ratiocinative desire' to explain deliberate action which is concerned with the choice of right means for the given ends. Hume's language in the *Treatise* is more blunt and aggressive when he says that "reason is and ought to be the slave of passions". But for those who are acquainted with the polemical background of his *magnum opus* it should not sound outrageous. In the *Enquiry* the same idea is expressed with moderation when he observes that "an active principle can never be founded on an inactive principle". For Hume ethical terms and judgements can be adequately analysed if it involves reference to the springs of human action i.e., passions. Conduct is concerned with ends and ends are grounded in human desires and feelings. Hence, it is not possible to give an explanation of moral decisions without relating them to human nature and the springs of action. But at the same time

proper place for the variations and differences in human situation and conditions have to be recognised.

The problem of giving reasons for ethical conclusions must be viewed within the context of the relation between an ethical concept and the possible circumstances of its application. One of the ways in which the distinction between facts and values has been made is concerning the nature of relation between meaning and criteria of application of descriptive and value terms. For descriptive terms the relation between their meanings and criteria of application is necessary while for value terms it is contingent. Any description of the circumstances of the application of value-terms may be disputed and alternative of rival circumstances may always be proposed. In Hart's language, moral terms are always 'defeasible.' Though reference to good-making characteristics would always constitute a part of reason for calling anything good, the characteristics in question are not logically bound with value or goodness. This, however, need not appear a frustrating situation as far as ethical reasoning is concerned and can never be a solace to a moral sceptic. A moral sceptic may try to make out a false case for the inferiority of moral reasoning to paradigms of rationality on the strength of the difference between moral values and facts and logic. But it is based on a serious misunderstanding of the nature of moral reasoning. Anyone who is looking for a neat and simple answer to the vexed question of the nature of moral reasoning in terms of deductive or inductive models is in for disappointment which harbours sceptical approach. Nevertheless, deductive and inductive models of reasoning are available to ethics but at the same time certain unproved and unprovable assumptions are accepted as self evident principles. It was in this context that Mill spoke of reasoning from particular to particular. If "questions of ultimate end are not amenable to direct proof," only indirect evidences,

confirmations and other analogues of reasoning are employed which have been variously characterised as 'exciting reasons,' 'justifying reasons', 'criterial reasons' and the like. All this falls in a pattern within the frame of human goals, purposes, desires and aspirations. Of all the various possible reasons for an action, context would determine which of them would suffice to justify a given act. But the question is too complex to be answered in terms of a uni-faced mode of reasoning.

C. S. Peirce once remarked that "logic is the ethics of the intellect". Renford Bambrough, by transposing the terms in Peirce's comment says, "ethics is the logic of the will and emotions".^b Morality requires the ordering and harmonization of our will and emotions in the sense that there must be some regulative and critical principles to make our hopes, aspirations, desires and emotions reasonable and intersubjectively or even universally desirable. And this cannot be achieved without making human needs, wants and desires the real actors in the play of reasoning. The self-regulative and self-critical role of one's moral ideas and principles is further linked with the concept of commitment involved in the acceptance of moral rules and norms. But this is not unique to ethics. As indicated above, if 'truth' and 'belief' have some intrinsic relation, commitment as a mental attitude may also be said to be involved in logic.

d) Now a few words about the last point. The ultimate nature of some moral principles surely demands that within the domain of ethics many rules can only be *ethically justified*, i.e., some ethical principles need be advanced in support of various ethical rules. But this circularity, again, is often seen to be present in the validation of logical rules. The latter can only be validated logically. This does not make the rational nature of logical justification suspect. The unprovability of ethical principles

is accepted in different languages by philosophers like Aristotle, Mill, Kant, Moore or Hare. It is not only peculiar to ethics but every epistemological theory may be shown to have presupposed itself in trying to justify its own tenets.

To conclude, apart from theoretical assumptions of moral scepticism which have been debated in the interest of moral objectivity and the possibility of moral knowledge, the practical consequence of moral scepticism may be morally damaging as it might lead to moral anarchy or even moral nihilism and moral solipsism. Such a state of affairs is painfully subversive of any concept of ethics which meaningfully employs notions of accountability, rule-governed behaviour, intersubjective agreement and disagreement or communication, rational decision making etc. without which ethics loses its relevance to problems of human conduct. Unfortunately the rationalists themselves have sometimes contributed to whatever limited appeal moral scepticism has gained. While on the one hand, since the days of Socrates and Plato, moral rationalists spearheaded the attack on moral relativism and scepticism, on the other hand it were mainly the extreme rationalists who, by their insistence on *a priori* nature of values, gave a fillip to moral scepticism as a reaction against their brand of rationalism. At the same time, as I have tried to show, the subjectivistic stance of some thinkers like Hume is misconstrued or exaggerated beyond reasonable limit. In *Enquiry*, Hume speaks of 'moral truths' which "he learns from reasoning and argument" (p. 278). He even admits that "virtue and vice become known; morals are recognised, general ideas are framed of human conduct". (p. 274) For Hume, moral principles are not irrational or non-rational, simply-consequent upon certain chance existence of our desires, but these are capable of "standing the test of reasoning and inquiry" (p. 279). In the last Appendix of the *Enquiry* he even goes to the extent of

observing that "intellectual virtues also have influence on conduct" (p. 313)—a view which even many objectivists would feel shy of admitting. It is also interesting to note that sometimes the intuitionists' position is so formulated that moral intuition appears to be the last resort of the *pretenders* to moral knowledge.*

Department of Humanities and
Social Sciences
IIT, KANPUR-208 016 (U P.)

S. A. SHAIDA

NOTES

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- * A paper read at the All-India Seminar on 'Scepticism' organized by the Department of Philosophy, Viswa-Bharati, Santiniketan, during March 25-27, 1988,

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