

## KANT'S MORALITY AND WILLIAMS' ETHICS

PALLAVI VAID

'Morality' can be understood as a social construct, a system for regulating the relations between people. To some extent, it is a theoretical construct too, a product of the philosophical impulse to arrive at a determinate account of 'right' and 'wrong'. The morality system, as represented by Kant, is preoccupied with detachment and impartiality and, Bernard Williams thinks, we would be better off without it. He distinguishes between the terms 'moral' or 'morality' and the ethical. The former is mainly about social expectations, socially expected norms which direct us to act in a particular way. On the other hand, the term 'ethical' emphasizes individual character<sup>1</sup>. Williams does not define the notion of the ethical. Instead he tells us what goes into this notion. Used in a wide sense, the various considerations that provide content to the term 'ethical' are those of obligation, and the various virtues including the tendency towards the welfare of others. Unlike Kantian morality, the ethical does not see moral obligation as inescapable, rather it is rightly seen as one kind of consideration among others.

Kant thought that moral considerations should be given the highest deliberative priority and that only an obligation can beat another obligation. When Kant thinks that the demands of morality are unconditional and necessary, they are so in the sense that they are obligatory independently of the agent's desires and inclinations which may interfere with the performance of duty. For Kant, unconditional practical necessity is peculiar to morality; nothing else can be unconditionally necessary except the requirements of moral law. But for us there are kinds of importance, and practical necessity may be available to reasons for action which are not strictly ethical in nature. Morality expects the perspective of

impartiality from agents, but agents have certain genuine personal needs also. In this light, objectivity or impartiality must not be so construed as to boil down to being other-oriented all the time. That is why, I think, in Aristotle's ethics, 'eudaimonia' or well being requires not just virtuous behaviour towards others but also self-sufficiency; on the whole a full development of one's capacities while living in a social world.

The problem is to generate a balance between the personal standpoint of an individual and the detached objective standpoint of morality. Williams is described as an antitheorist for he is sceptical about the role of moral theory in deciding how to lead a good life. The obligations that it wants us to acknowledge could result in the alienation of the individual from important personal projects and commitments. A blind commitment to an impersonal moral theory prevents or diminishes many spontaneous and desirable actions. Suppose two persons are drowning and a rescuer can save only one of them; one of them is his wife. Should he try to be impartial and decide, e. g., by flipping a coin?<sup>2</sup> It is obvious, Williams says, that there is no need in this case to appeal to impartial moral principles, to try to justify one's decision to save one's wife.

A serious limitation of Kantian morality is its opposition to the idea that moral responsibility and moral assessment should be subject to luck. The notion of moral luck as discussed by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel highlight the defects and misconceptions of Kantian morality. The first thing that strikes one is - how can a moral matter depend on luck? The dictionary meaning of 'luck' is "a force that brings good fortune or adversity, the events or circumstances that operate for or against an individual" and also, "to come upon something desirable by chance".<sup>3</sup> When it is said that good or bad luck enters one's actions and hence moral responsibility the idea is that what is not in the agent's domain is not in his control and is thus subject to luck. The agent cannot be morally assessed, praise or blame apportioned, for what is due to factors beyond his control.

Kant also did not believe that one's entire life was immune to luck. However he did believe that moral value and one's moral life was immune to luck or chance. For Kant, the disposition to correct moral judgement and the object of such judgement are free from external contingency because both are the product of the unconditioned will. Since a morally good life is open to all, any conception of

'moral luck' is incoherent.

Nagel identifies four ways in which the objects of moral assessment are subject to luck: (a) Constitutive luck - this has reference to the kind of person an agent is, his inclinations, capacities and temperament. (b) Circumstantial luck, good or bad, is evidenced in the problems, the situations one is confronted with and which affirm his as a moral or immoral person. (c) Luck in how one and one's actions are determined by antecedent circumstances. (d) Luck in the way one's projects and actions turn out<sup>4</sup>.

In considering the possibility of constitutive luck, one may ask whether the qualities of temperament and personality are morally irrelevant? As Kant believed, whatever one's temperament may be, sympathetic, generous, or indifferent and unkind, one can always try to behave perfectly by a monumental effort of will. Sympathy, generosity, courage and the like are achievable by effort; improvement as a result of introspection is possible. Such qualities indicate something good or bad about one's personality - the kind of person you are and the way you want to be, prefer to be (may be, because of selfishness). And so 'the kind of person you are' is not wholly a matter of luck but rather one of pride or shame and also praise or blame. Nagel writes: "There is a close connection between our feelings about ourselves and our feelings about others. Guilt and indignation, shame and contempt, pride and admiration are internal and external sides of the same moral attitudes<sup>5</sup>.

If one becomes angry over a trivial issue to the point of kicking the other person such a trait would be blameworthy. Sometimes people are unkind and nasty, not because they are helpless but because they want to react that way - it is in their own interest. In such cases there is nothing unintended or unchosen and luck-ridden about such traits and the connected behaviour. From the moral point of view, I feel, such actions are unfortunate yet willed.

A person may have a bad intention towards another or he may have any other vice. "Even if one controls the impulse to act badly one still has the vice. An envious person hates the greater success of others. He can be morally condemned as envious even if he congratulates them cordially and does nothing to denigrate or spoil their success."<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Rescher makes an important point

here. He writes : "The difference between the would-be thief who lacks opportunity and his cousin who gets and seizes it is not one of moral condition (which by hypothesis is the same on both sides); their moral record may differ, but their moral standing does not. From the vantage point of one who 'sees all, knows all' through a vision that penetrates into a person's depths, the moral status of the two individuals would be the same."<sup>7</sup> Here the luck involved is not merely moral, but merely epistemic. "The 'morally lucky' villain is not *morally* lucky, he is lucky only in that his reprehensible nature is not disclosed. The difference is not moral but epistemic. It is precisely both one's opportunities for morally relevant action and the actual consequences of one's acts lie beyond one's control that they are determinants of one's position in the eyes of morality."<sup>8</sup> Kant is aware of this subtle point, which is why he insists that it is motive or intention that counts, not the changes actually effected in the world.

Like the expression 'moral luck' the term 'constitutive luck' also seems to be an oxymoron in a way in which 'circumstantial luck' is not. For example, when someone has the tendency to do a dishonest act and actually does it, interfacing the concept of moral responsibility with that of constitutive luck seems odd. We cannot make dishonesty a matter of constitutive luck while people suffer. If someone is dishonest and as a matter of habit would remain so, then that dishonesty is a non-impulsive feature and hence constitutive of his personality. A rare, one-time selfish act is not constitutive but impulsive; doing so as a matter of habit is non-impulsive and thus constitutive of one's personality. Let us suppose that there is a man with a lifelong record of being honest. For once he is motivated to do a dishonest act and eventually loses his reputation. He is responsible for this particular act and yet he can be seen as an object of constitutive luck because a single deed erodes his reputation of being an honest man. What matters from the moral point of view is character, disposition, and intention, not the worldly reputation which a person may be fortunate enough to have. What one is constituted of and retains, I think, is not a matter of constitutive luck; what one does impulsively in a single instance, contrary to one's abiding character and which works to erode and negate that character is a case of constitutive luck.

But this is not the only kind of luck. Circumstantial luck is the most crucial.

A lot has been said about luck in one's circumstances in Aristotle's works. In *Nicomachean Ethics*,<sup>9</sup> Aristotle dwells on the possibility of misfortune. He asks whether a man can be called happy in his lifetime, since misfortune can befall him. Even when he ceases to be happy due to misfortune, he does not cease to be virtuous. A good life, Aristotle says, is realized in and through virtuous behaviour. Although imperfect and limited, human beings have special worth because of the power of reason and the ability to control emotions. The goodness of a good person lies in his having a stable character. Having good intentions and good thoughts is a sign of living well: if one does not act badly but still has a bad intention towards another person, one's life would not be a good life.

Good character, however, is not sufficient for the full goodness of life. It is possible for a state to be present and yet accomplish nothing good, which is the case with non-active persons. Such persons would not receive moral praise, for, the good character must find expression in virtuous activity. Character alone is not sufficient - it must find its fulfillment in action. Like an actor who is always waiting in the wings but never appears on stage is not doing his job; an inactive person makes the virtuous state fruitless.

Virtuous action sometimes be disrupted or impeded by circumstances. Bad luck in the form of impediments can come to the agent from the world outside him and also from his own weaknesses, viz., unruly desires and emotions, also known as the irrational parts of the human soul; the agent is no doubt endowed with reason, yet many things are beyond our control - the control of reason. Our life is to a great extent messy and uncontrolled. And so in addition to the power of reason we need many other resources - good birth, good (healthy) body, for, sickness prevents one from acting well, good circumstances, for, when misfortune and deprivation are severe or excessively prolonged one can be dislodged from a good human life forever.

Williams also distinguishes between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' luck, that is to say, luck intrinsic or extrinsic to a project. He considers the case of a creative artist, Gauguin, who turns away from significant human claims to live a life in which he can pursue art. In Gauguin's case, Williams thinks, the only thing that will justify his choice will be success itself; if he fails then perhaps he did the

wrong thing in the sense that now he has no basis for the thought that he was justified in acting as he did. If Gauguin's project fails because of some injury on the way to Tahiti which prevents his painting again, this would be a case of bad luck extrinsic to the project. Such bad circumstantial luck is too external to the project to unjustify him. But if *he* fails because of a lack of talent what goes wrong is intrinsic to the project, and it is this condition which entails his unjustification. If Gauguin is not genuinely creative because of which he fails, one may ask, is it a case of moral luck at all? We expect him to know in advance of undertaking any such project, whether or not he possesses the requirred talent.

Gauguin's failure due to his own inadequacies need not count as ill-luck. It highlights rather his lack of self-knowledge. And there is also the dimension of moral cost. Even if Gauguin succeeds as a painter that outcome need not provide him with any way of justifying himself to others. Gauguin's case shows, I feel, the tension between the claims his family and the requirements of morality on the one hand, and the claims of an artist on the other. He may not succeed due to an accident. Even if he succeeds there is still the presence of moral cost. Success does not determine his moral place, for, "if the people who have been wronged do not accept the justification, then no one can demand that they should. It is for them to decide how far they are prepared to adopt the perspective within which the justification counts."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, if he is justified in pursuing art it is so even when his project fails. Another significant point is that in Kantian morality the idea of 'moral cost' is tied to the idea of 'moral wrong'. One may ask: does 'moral cost' have to be synonymous with 'moral wrong'? Not entirely, since a moral point of view, different from Kant's may well encourage the pursuit of creativity.

Shall we not say, then, that there is such a thing as moral luck? Being internally talented or virtuous is not enough, one has to do acts which exhibit the connected talent or virtue. At the level of action there may be vulnerability to the circumstances of life. When vulnerability is real it clearly means there is no pure agency, no unconditioned will. Our social and moral world is subject to good or bad luck. We cannot proceed with the task of moral evaluation, of ascribing or acknowledging moral responsibility without looking at such possibilities. All

those circumstances that control or constrain us are a kind of determinism. The agent could be determined by his needs and emotions, determined by a scarcity of resources and opportunities, by different responsibilities that make claims on the agent - all of which may be acceptable to him, and worst of all, determined by circumstances created by one group, caste, race or gender that are to the disadvantage of others, what Williams calls prejudices.<sup>11</sup> That truly is bad luck. Yet such determinism does not imply exemption from the framework of moral responsibility. Rather it brings us back to and reaffirms the age-old wisdom contained in Aristotelian ethics viz., that a wise and well-meaning person would be able to resist misfortune, finding a way to act nobly even under unfavourable circumstances. With will and effort circumstances might improve, without willpower and effort there is actually no hope.

Our discussion of moral luck challenges the linkage between the notions of morality and supreme value. It shows how Williams has contributed towards an increased understanding of our ethical life. Moral value is not immune to the assaults of luck nor is it of overwhelmingly great importance than anything else. This fact is no longer a matter of controversy. The contingencies that can affect action, motive, character, in short, human will, reveal that our moral opinions and moral assessment are susceptible to the problems posed by luck. Moral ideas are a consequence of our rationality and of the circumstance that we are social beings (any civilized society requires a set of principles which people subscribe to) yet it is not open to all beings equally. In other words, the Kantian conception of 'immunity, is an "obsessional exaggeration."<sup>12</sup>

However there is one more idea in Kant which qualifies for the status of 'supreme value'. Kant said that the goodwill is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes; it is good only because of its willing i.e., it is good of itself. "Even if it should happen that, by a particularly unfortunate fate or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should be wholly lacking in power to accomplish its purpose, and if even the greatest effort should not avail it to achieve anything of its end, and if there remained only the goodwill (not as a mere wish but as the summoning of all the means in our power), it would sparkle like a jewel in its own right, as something that had its full worth in itself. Usefulness

or fruitlessness can neither diminish nor argment this worth.”<sup>13</sup> For us, a goodwill is not always enough; it should find expression in good action. However, since the good will is not independent of all the contingencies of the world which can impede and obstruct action. Even when it it fails to accomplish its purpose it would still have a special, indeed, supreme value, for, despite misfortune and disappointments it intends to act well and retains the intention to act well. A will can be good and hence valuable even when it does exclude feelings/inclinations, even when it does not satisfy the standards of common, conventional morality. Such a *will* can take initiative for achieving beneficial results which normally a follower of conventional morality would not do. For example, a soldier trying to help a badly injured soldier from the enemy camp, not in his capacity of a soldier, but as a human being. the action may not be an outcome of his occasional kindness but of his constitutive nature i.e., goodwill, which would always be an asset to society. Its worth is not tied to this particular gesture, it exceeds and surpasses narrow definitions of ‘duty’ and reveals the agent’s belief in and respect for humanity. In my opinion not only the fact of moral luck, the occurrence of moral dilemmas (like the dilemma regarding one’s duty as a loyal soldier and duty as a human being) and the applicability of more than moral principle to a situtation also show why the idea of the supreme value of morality accessible to all rational agents, is to be rejected. Not only there is no unconditioned moral value, there is no single moral value or *the* moral value. There are so many different societies, nations and cultures yet one humanity and goodwill is essential to humanity. But we do not have a ‘morality’ in the sense in which moral dilemmas are unreal or avoidable.

The rejection of the idea of the supreme value of morality does nothing to the idea of a good will sparkling like a jewel in its own right. But it does weaken the Kantian idea that in order to have moral worth the will must be motivated to act independently of inclination. A good will may be rendered incapable to achieve its noble end - this is one aspect of the problem; but if the good will is wholly lacking or absent in an individual there is no opportunity for it to be directed towards augmenting peace and happiness and diminishing misery. For purposes of duties towards oneself what is required is a free and capable will; from the point of view of social living what matters most is whether an agent has a good or



bad will. A bad will shall have or is likely to have evil purpose whereas a good will would be opposed to evil purposes. The fact remains that will, motive or intention, however vulnerable, are crucial since decisions/actions result from them. The idea that I am trying to convey here is not that one is either wholly good or bad with no shades of grey in between or that goodness cannot be cultivated; rather Good Will, I think, has supreme value in its will to resist evil, even if subsequently unsuccessful, and it can be utilized to solve our problems. Though one cannot make oneself immune to diseases and pain, droughts and cyclones, one can by an effort of will get down to tackling those problems which are generated by our own vested interests. The mere acknowledgement of moral luck does not offer us much solace. The real challenge is to expose and alleviate man-made determinism—one that comes not from the physical world but from society. The job of reducing the bad luck that comes from unfair conventions and practices does not require absolute freedom or absolute reason. It requires a human will, persevering, hence good.

Our problems would be greatly reduced if we were to adopt a new morality, the crux of which would be the idea of good will and excellence of character which translates into action. That is the only path the only hope. Williams has made us aware that moral assessment would be biased, mistaken and inaccurate if we were to hold on to the idea that luck has nothing to do with our moral life. The circumstantial bad luck exemplified in the present day problems relating to caste, race and gender, has to be tackled. These problems cannot be managed by simply hoping and praying for a change of heart and perspective in the agents i.e., those who perpetrate unfavourable circumstances for others. Change is brought about by those who suffer (the unlucky) and that requires willing. Goodness of character or virtuous intention is not sufficient to eliminate circumstantial bad luck. What matters most is willing or being able to will. Kantian good will provides a right answer to those who feel concerned about the problems afflicting the world. A good general is he who makes efficient use of the troops he has, likewise a person with a good will finds a way to act nobly even under unfavourable circumstances. And trying to act is possible because our cognitive abilities are as active in social spheres as they are in matters of science and technology - we perceive, analyse, deliberate and apply our moral thoughts to the problems we

confront.

I shall now discuss Williams' views on the lack of conceptual homogeneity in ethics. Williams' ethics begins with a sensitive understanding of facts concerning our moral lives, in fact the entire human situation. One such major fact is the agent's being susceptible to constraints both from within and without. Williams reveals his sympathetic understanding when he discusses the notions of moral luck, moral cost and also the lack of conceptual homogeneity. These new ideas also mean that we have made some progress in ethical thought. We have taken a step forward from the old ways of thinking in realising that moral values cannot be applied out of context. Kant made the mistake of prescribing duty without reference to facts that affect the agent. Moral value is independent of the contingencies of the world and thus detached from facts. Williams' ethics takes note of the real world in which agents are placed and this significantly changes the character of moral assessment. Williams also recognizes that there is lack of conceptual homogeneity over ethical issues. But I fail to understand how this empirical fact can be used to conclude that "when writers remark 'there is only one set of virtues that contribute to human flourishing, and that they are differently interpreted under different societal arrangements they are drawing on an account which we do not know to contain any funds at all.'"<sup>14</sup> The prevalent heterogeneity of interests and perceptions clearly means that we are bound to adapt, relatives and modify for various empirical reasons. Such heterogeneity, however, does not mean that we do not subscribe to a set of virtues, principles, in short, moral ideas. If we believe, as Williams does, not to have or not to know that there are authentic, objectively valid ethical concepts that can contribute to human flourishing, have we really made an advance in ethical thought?

How long can ethics keep on emphasizing the fact of heterogeneity? Even if one were to philosophically challenge the availability of valid ethical concepts, as an individual one would still apply them in personal life. As a matter of fact, every culture adheres to principles of human dignity, justice, kindness and so on. Although we do not have an exhaustive list of principles, and we do have appropriate, sometimes inappropriate relativisations, our interpersonal relations and expectations from others do reveal our understanding and adhering to a set

of moral ideas. We disagree with the stringency surrounding Kantian notion of duty yet we have the notion of duty in everyday life; we may have problems with the formulation of the Categorical Imperative - "So act that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as means"<sup>15</sup> - still we apply the concept of human dignity and well-being at least in relation to oneself and one's family. Even a dishonest man expects honesty and fair play in his own case. When the fact of heterogeneity of interests and perceptions has not missed our attention how can we overlook the very real fact that although we may not apply these principles all the time, in relation to all, we do apply them most of the time for oneself. In as much as heterogeneity is there, guidelines for conduct are also available.

Williams believes that we do not have a robust sense of there being a collective cognitive enterprise in ethics, such that we can represent our rejection of alien concepts and our use of our own as in itself an advance in knowledge.<sup>16</sup> In so far as Williams has in mind thick ethical concepts which are culturally rooted and differ from society to society, we can speak of "our" concepts vis-a-vis "alien" concepts. For example, the descriptive content of the thick concept 'kind' varies from culture to culture. For some killing an animal is unkind, for some, killing in a certain way is unkind, for still others, not giving alms to the poor is unkind. But the spirit of these different thick concepts comes from principles or ethical concepts which have stood the test of time and rationality and must not be hastily put into the category of thin concepts such as 'right' and 'good'. Thick concepts are connected to practice, any they would not be practiced (they are practiced when someone acts in accordance with them and in the process of evaluating actions) if it were not for our conviction in these principles. We still have abiding conviction in their validity and their role in determining the quality of our lives. Otherwise the content of our thick concepts would not only vary from place to place and time to time, rather they would disappear altogether from our interpersonal relations. The import of such concepts could be diluted to such an extent that gradually some such concept is pushed out of practice. If none believed in the validity of the principle of honesty, the word 'honest' would have neither of these meanings - professional honesty, honesty towards one's nation,

family, community, or one that extends to all human beings; it would not be found in practice.

Shall we say then that all these principles which are sustained by our reasoned conviction and arbitrarily, are our body of knowledge? Williams seems to reserve the claim 'we know' for empirical statements and applies the phrase 'we do not know' to ethical thought. We have to disagree with the "only one" mindset in ethics, one which tries to reduce the various concepts to a single, dominant concept such as 'duty'. But we also have to give up the view that we do not know if there are concepts universally valid and which contribute to human welfare - it is sane to believe in them even while recognizing that they may not always be applicable or obeyable, which again points to the complexities of the world we live in.

The lack of conceptual homogeneity that Williams speaks of is equally true of other empirical domains, say, disagreement over one's choice of career, evaluation of literary works and even historical research. By overstressing the fact of ethical heterogeneity we run the risk of manoeuvring, of a voluntary immunity to values. When we allow for a relational approach in ethics it is because we are interested in better evaluation and practice. It does not disown ethical reasoning. In the example Williams discusses<sup>17</sup> - of a group of boys torturing a cat - the situation is ethical in nature and even if someone finds it amusing or funny it still does not mean that there are correct alternative ways of describing this 'cruel' act. To allow the application of the term 'funny' to this situation, especially by mature adults, is to be on the wrong track. Mis-perceiving or misidentifying an issue should count as a cognitive shortcoming. The response that it is funny does not indicate relativity; rather it falls outside ethical reasoning. There is no logical warrant, I believe, for applying a non-ethical or anti-ethical concept to an explicitly ethical situation. A similar misperception is involved in Williams' comment that there may be other ways to evaluate institutions such as slavery.<sup>18</sup>

Granted that there is a heterogeneity of perceptions and also widespread recognition of it across cultures, especially in democratic societies, the real problem, to my mind, is not that we are foolishly aiming at and trying to uncover

one homogeneous ethical language. What requires attention is that people not only apply different ethical concepts to ethical situations but that they have no qualms in applying non-ethical concepts to ethical situations. Is it acceptable to ethical thought if people treat issues like slavery and child labour in a value-neutral way? What will be the consequence of such a trend? Even when a majority of persons have such bizarre responses they are not cases of reflective assessment at all. It seems to me that a philosopher whose primary concern is responsible action and the agent's reflective assessment of his actions<sup>19</sup> radically moves away from that concern as well as ethical rationality in holding the above-quoted views.\*

### NOTES

\* I thank professor Vijay Bharadwaja, University of Delhi, for reading and commenting upon an earlier draft of this paper.

- 1 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985, p.6. Hereafter abbreviated as ELP.
- 2 Williams, 'Persons, Character and Morality' in *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1981, p.18
- 3 *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*
- 4 Thomas Nagel, *Moral Questions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 1979, p.28
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.37
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.33
- 7 Nicholas Rescher, 'Moral Luck', in *Moral Luck*, ed., Daniel Statman, SUNY Press, Albany, New York, 1993, p.154
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.156
- 9 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, Chapter 10

- 10 Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1981, p.37
- 11 Williams, *ELP*, 1985, p.117
- 12 Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1981, p.22
- 13 Cited from Nagel, *op.cit.*, p.24
- 14 Williams, 'Truth in Ethics', in *Ratio*, Vol.8, 1995, p.242
- 15 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: cited from *Philosophy 2*, ed. A.C. Grayling, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p.624
- 16 Williams, 'Replies', in *World, Mind and Ethics*, ed. Altham and Harrison, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p.208
- 17 Williams, 'Truth in Ethics' *Ratio*, 1995, p.237
- 18 'Objective and Subjective in Ethics', *Ratio*, 1995, p.250
- 19 Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1981, p.22