

## A NOTE ON ROSS

Sir David Ross in his "*Foundations of Ethics*" seeks to vindicate an Objectivist or Realistic Ethics i. e., the view that rightness and goodness are objective properties of actions and motives etc. respectively, rather than subjective ascriptions to these.

Basic to this view is the conviction that there can no contradictory moral statements. For to correctly predicate of the same action both rightness and wrongness, is evidently impossible, if it is assumed that its moral character is an objective property of the action. On such a view, a morally significant action must be right *or* wrong, but not *both* right and wrong.

To substantiate his contention, Ross cites two sets of examples mentioned by Taylor. Each of these appears to show that there *are* contradictory moral statements, i. e., that there are statements which (a) predicate a moral property of an action, and (b) which contradict each other. To each case, Ross will show that although the two statements satisfy (a), they fail to fulfil (b) as the contradiction involved is not real but only apparent and really due to an extraneous factor such as difference of opinion regarding matters of fact or differences in circumstances prevailing in different societies.

(1) Some assert that it is right to vaccinate children, while others judge this action to be wrong. While both assertions predicate a moral quality (hence satisfy (a)), they really turn only on a difference of opinion, as to the question of fact whether vaccination does or does not prevent small-pox, while both parties accept the more basic principle that parents should try to protect their children from disease. Hence (b) is not satisfied.

(2) In some societies, blood-feud is considered right while in other societies it is judged to be wrong. This apparent contradiction may be explained by the simple fact that in many early societies there is no other means to punish criminals and to secure respect for life—while in a more organised state of

society there are public agencies and institutions to fulfil these functions—while again, both parties agree on the more basic principle that life must be respected. Hence, though fulfilling (a), this example again does not satisfy (b).

Now, Ross' position that there are no contradictory moral statements may be challenged in the context of the controversy as to whether the goodness of an end justifies the adoption of *any* end or not. To state the two positions more accurately : (i) An action which is an end is right, if it is right, if and only if all the actions, which are means to its realisation, are right, too. (ii) An action which is an end is right, if it is right, even if some of the means to its realisation are wrong.

Now, both propositions satisfy (a), as they ascribe a certain moral property. But they also satisfy (b) as the same action, X, may be judged wrong by one person, *because* it involves a wrong action as a means, while another person may consider X right *even though* it involves a wrong action as a means. This contradiction cannot be resolved as in the previous cases as due to factual circumstances or considerations, for this controversy contains no factual but only valuational elements. Nor can the contradictory views be reduced to a common ground, such as e. g., the common view that the good end should be sought or realised—for it is precisely this evaluation of the end vis-a-vis the moral character of the means leading to its realisation that is of concern here.

It would seem to follow that there *are* contradictory moral statements, but as no action or motive can both have and not have a certain moral property at once, it would follow that *some* moral statements at least do not ascribe objective moral properties but express subjective attitudes or reactions. This conclusion is of course not acceptable to the Moral Realist, for he claims that *all* moral statements refer to objectively real moral properties.

Alternatively one may fall back on a view closely connected to moral realism, namely the contention that moral statements are cognitive in character, rather than merely expressing a feeling or command. On such a view, a moral assertion is a proposi-

tion and as such must, by definition, be either true or false, i.e., it is either true or false to ascribe a certain moral property to an action or motive. Consequently only one of the contradictory propositions (i) and (ii) can be true and prima facie the true proposition seems to be (i) as the wrongness of the means would appear to affect the rightness of the end.

Perhaps Ross could easily have ruled out the possibility of contradictory moral statements by simply pointing to the cognitive nature of moral assertions and the definition of cognitive statements or propositions as statements which are either true or false thereby implying that contradictory moral statements cannot both be true. To take recourse to examples and to proceed inductively, may rather have weakened than strengthened his case, and moreover, the examples chosen carried little weight.

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