

NATURE OF ETHICAL STATEMENTS

The question concerning the nature of ethical statements has arrested the attention not only of modern or recent philosophers but ancient philosophy too has found it so extremely attractive a subject. This shows, on the one hand, men's perennial and sustained interest in the problem and, on the other, various intricacies which are involved in it. Though, at commonsense level, it is one of the phenomena which are, cognitively, the least difficult to see, at philosophical plane it proved most baffling and some very unusual and, at times, confused solutions have been put forward by way of discerning the nature of ethical statements.

I shall try to briefly outline some of the important attempts to understand the nature of ethical statements and, then, will discuss some of the important features which, in my view, mark out such statements from the rest.

When we look forward for certain criteria or distinct features with the help of which we may conveniently sift out ethical statement from the rest, we are in fact engaged in the dual function of discerning moral statements from (a) factual statements, and (b) other value statements. The distinction between moral statements and factual ones has mostly been quite clearly recognised though the sharpness of this distinction has often varied in its intensity. But the other distinction, i. e., between ethical statements and other value statements, has not commonly been drawn with as much precision and clarity. The specific difficulty in distinguishing the two lies in the fact that ethical statements are a sub-class of value statements. Not only this, but often they are called just evaluative or value statements as distinguished from factual or descriptive statements and, therefore, not all philosophers have found it so important and necessary to say much on this distinction. This may, however, lead a beginner to think that there is no significant difference between moral statements and other (non-moral) value statements. We will, therefore, attempt to bring out such features of ethical statements which may clearly point towards both the kinds of distinction.

Aristotle in fact clearly saw the need of emphasizing the twofold distinction when he talked of moral judgements as the conclusion of a practical syllogism. To say that the conclusion of a practical syllogism was an action, was not only to emphasize the action-guiding or action-tending character of moral statements but was also to indicate the point that it is a reasoned or justifiable conclusion since it follows from the premises which together imply it. Within the context it was deemed unquestionable that reasons or justification could be supplied for an ethical statement and that once the premises were accepted as true, the conclusion was logically inevitable. However, this account of Aristotle's practical syllogism would seem appropriate if we talk of the conclusion as practical proposition rather than an action. But this would take away much of the sense from the term 'practical syllogism' as opposed to ordinary syllogistic reasoning. (This point cannot be dealt with in detail in the present paper.) The action-guiding nature of moral judgements was foremost in Aristotle's mind when he talked of ethics as a practical science. Other features of ethical statements which stand out in Aristotle's approach to this problem can, in short, be termed as objectivity, universality and reason-proneness.

It is not difficult to see that most of what Aristotle explicitly or implicitly held, has been affirmed with varying emphasis by Kant. The action-guiding force of ethical statements was emphasised by both Kant and Sidgwick through their concept of practical reason.

The distinction between ethical statements and factual statements has been clearly drawn by most of the moral philosophers i. e., Cudworth, Hume, Kant, Mill and others, but most of them at the same time recognised and tried to explain the close connection between the two. Ethical statements are indeed different from factual or descriptive ones, yet they are about or (putting it more succinctly) upon facts. Again, when the question of justification or evidence is raised, the sort of justification offered are one or the other kind of facts. This has lent force to descriptivism because seemingly ethical statements turn out to be disguised descriptive statements. If the moral conclusion in fact follows from a set of factual statements, then either there

is nothing peculiarly moral in the conclusion which is not analysable in terms of factual statements, of this kind of reasoning violates simple but basic canons of logical reasoning. This was the point which was forcefully asserted in Moore's 'Naturalistic Fallacy' argument and has been reasserted by a host of contemporary moral philosophers like Popper, Toulmin, Hare and others. All are agreed on the issue that ethical statements are to be contradistinguished from factual or descriptive statements but not on the question as to what the former in fact are. The action-guiding, choice-guiding, emotion-expressing, injunction-giving, impreative or prescription-expressing nature of ethical statements has been variously emphasized by one or the other. The cue for such explanations has been taken by most of them from Wittgenstein's functional-operational view of language and the language-games. That moral language is a peculiar language-game with its own criteria and norms drawn from the specific purpose to which they are employed is the common assumption behind all these theories. But most of those answers generally suffer from, what Wittgenstein has called, 'one-sided diet'. This explains their insistence on the exclusiveness of one particular aspect as the only ethical or moral meaning of these statements. On the other hand, there are philosophers like P. T. Geach and Philipa Foot who have sought to vindicate descriptivism or naturalism.

Geach, nevertheless, admits the action-guiding force of ethical terms which, in the views of prescriptivists like Hare, make ethical statements irreducible to mere descriptive *analysans*. But, according to Geach, choice is an inalienable part of the meaning of ethical terms, and this aspect of the meaning is determined by what he calls the *ratio* of human wants and desires, combined together with a description of situations and contexts. Hence, all the alleged commendatory or hortatory functions of ethical terms do follow from mere descriptive sense of ethical terms. The dependence of evaluative meaning on descriptive meaning is also brought out by him in his characterising ethical terms like 'good' as an attributive adjective as opposed to a predicative adjective.² Similarly, Philipa Foot argued from the nature of evidence in the context of moral judgements to advocate the view that moral terms have no meaning except the

fixed descriptive meanings which logically follow from the use of these terms and judgements.³ For her, any explication of ethical statements are bound to be an analysis in naturalistic terms.⁴

II

Any attempt to understand the nature of ethical statements at once raises certain intricacies which are built in the uses and functions of moral language. The fact that neither it is *a priori* nor *a posteriori* raises the question as to what in fact it is. In order to find the answer we have to attend to various aspects of moral statements which distinguish them from both factual and non-moral value statements.

A moral statement is either an expression of obligation or an expression of moral evaluation, commendation or approval based on some particular point of view at a given moment. The former meaning is generally expressed through the word 'ought' which is etymologically derived from 'owe' (the word 'ought' is the past tense of 'owe')⁵. Thus, what one ought to do is something which one owes to others. Whatever may be the primitive form of owing or acknowledging that one owes, there is implicit or explicit awareness of obligatoriness being attached to these actions which are motivated by the realisation that 'one (I) owes (owe) something to someone'. The same state of affairs is brought out by 'duty' which means certain action is accepted to be both obligatory and necessary in the light of some accepted mode of behaviour or form of life.

Thus a moral statement is an expression of value or obligation which is about a person, his qualities and character, motive, intention or actions. In making such statements we are preferring, commending or doing some similar things. But at the same time we refer, presuppose or intend to imply some factual or descriptive characteristics. This is the sense which is brought out in the familiar mode of expression that a moral judgement is 'upon' something. It is indeed obvious that no moral statements can be made without there being something or some fact which is judged or evaluated. What characteristics are being referred to depend on, what Nowell-Smith has called 'contextual

implication'. The role and significance of facts are prominently seen in the event of justification or evidence for ethical statements. But to ask for a reason in this context is not to be confused with asking for the meaning of a word or a sentence, nor should it be taken to be a relation between the premises and the conclusion in a deductive system. Facts adduced in justification of, or reasons for, an ethical statement are themselves not ethical. Their being relevant or proper depends on some particular frame of reference or value-scheme within which one particular set of facts rather than the other becomes convincing or worth presenting. Thus the selection of reasons or justification pre-supposes values which function as models and paradigms for particular moral judgements. In other words, our general evaluations and universal value and obligation statements serve as models or cues in the light of which we tend to pass judgements on persons and actions.

The seeming deductive model of reasoning is deceptively involved in cases of pronouncing particular moral judgements. But as a matter of fact, it is the observation of relevant similarities between the paradigm cases of values and particular judgements which justifies the latter. Therefore, any talk concerning deductive demonstration of any ethical conclusion appears to be misplaced. Moreover, since a number of values or schemes of values are possible, the possibility of contrary or even contradictory ethical conclusions can never be ruled out.

Following features, however, may point out the distinct nature of moral statements which distinguish these from both factual and other non-moral value statements. Within the scope of the present paper, I can only enumerate them with very brief explanations.

1. Universalizability :

Moral statements are universal in the sense that they are in principle addressed to, or applicable to, all persons without exceptions. A full-fledged moral judgement is universalization of a value or an obligation. The passage from 'I ought to desire X' to 'everyone ought to desire X' is based on the realisation of relevant and pertinently significant similarities in the

circumstances and situations. Similarly, the passage from 'I ought to do X' to 'Everyone or anyone ought to do X' is only the explication of the implicit universality in our judgements of obligation. The well known example is the relation between the 'desire' and the 'desirable' which asserts the universalization of the object of desire. It is in this sense that we call it prescriptive. Needless to say that if what has so far been stated holds good of ethical statements, they are objective and impersonal. Their being objective and impersonal, however, does not altogether abnegate presence of feelings and emotions. On the contrary, barring those few cases where our ethical statements might in some sense be completely free from any feelings or emotions, all uses of 'good'/'bad', 'ought'/'ought-not' and 'right'/'wrong' presuppose some feelings and emotions in their ultimate analyses. And finally, universalizability of ethical statements does also include, in one of its meanings, rationally justifiable nature of ethical statements. Rational justifiability can, of course, be proposed as a corollary from primary sense of universalisability which Kant and Hare have so forcefully adumbrated. It can be understood as the possibility of justification of an ethical statement for the same reasons in all cases irrespective of personal predilections and ideosyncracies (reference to significant differences and dissimilarities should indeed be taken note of). Even a subjectivist like Sartre admitted that in making a choice one was choosing for entire humanity—though, of course, Sartre's reasons for making such an assertion were not the same as those of Kant.

2. Practical Import :

Secondly, the action-guiding function of ethical statements does necessitate it on the part of any individual, who is the author of such a statement, to act accordingly. The inability to do accordingly or the case of doing contrary has to be explained with some justifying reasons, or, else, it may be left to be explained by what the Greeks called *Akrasia* (i. e. the weakness of the will). Similarly, when addressed to others, it seeks to guide, goad, advise, commend, command or persuade others to do or to have something enjoined upon by any ethical statements. As stated above, philosophers from Aristotle onwards have

stressed the need to recognise the practical import implicit in all our ethical statements.

3. Attitudes and Commitments :

Ethical Statements do presuppose certain relevant attitudes and commitments which are imperative for anyone who formulates, asserts, or accepts any ethical statement. Such a person will be said to fail in his understanding of the nature of an ethical statement if he is, e. g. saying or accepting 'X is good' but is having the contrary attitude of condemning or denouncing 'X'. An ethical statement will not be genuine or authentic unless proper and relevant attitudes are present in the person who makes it or owns it. Likewise one is committed to do or to have something which directly follows from ethical statement. The moment we say that 'X is good/right' we honestly realise that we have already committed ourselves to a certain position from which we cannot retrace ourselves without abandoning the earlier statement. A non-committed statement, therefore, is always essentially a value-free statement. Moral commitment is essentially and more explicitly a commitment to act in a certain manner and not merely a commitment to think or to like something in a particular way.

4. Desires, Emotions and Feelings :

The psychological background of ethical statements is an inalienable element in the analysis of such statements. The weakness of emotivism does not lie in recognising the role played by feelings and emotions in ethical statements but it is due to the exclusiveness with which they sought to identify them with the peculiarly ethical sense. An objectivist and non-naturalist like Moore was also constrained to admit that feelings, emotions are to be inevitably included in any analysis of ethical words and statements. The emotive overtones of 'good' and 'ought' are an undeniable fact of our normal life. These are built-in features of our phenomenology of moral consciousness.

5. Social Aspect :

By and large, ethical statements have a social aspect which is

more evident in obligation statements but which is clear enough in even value statements by virtue of their universality. Ethical statements, in their primary meaning at least, can never be legitimately and meaningfully pronounced on an individual *qua* individual. Statements of obligation do enjoin upon others—and in fact, upon all in a similar context—certain obligatory actions or duties; statements of value imply that if something is good for one it is necessarily good for all, other things being equal. Such statements, therefore, can never be made without taking into account the situations, hopes, aspirations, desires and other considerations involving the persons concerned. Such considerations must be relevant to assess what does or does not constitute a duty or what is or is not valuable to an individual who may always share some relevant features with others. The social reference of ethical statements has been clearly recognised by most of the Greek moral thinkers, utilitarians, many modern subjectivists, Toulmin and others. But it is also implicit in all the rest of them who have not cared to make it explicitly a part of their ethical writings.

6. Seriousness :

Finally, I may state that one of the striking features of ethical statements is the over-ridingness and seriousness with which we accept or believe whatever is implied or enjoined by ethical statements. It is of course more obvious in characterising moral principles and duties, but it holds good in varying degrees of all ethical statements. Cases of deliberate lying and hypocrisy apart, all genuine ethical statements are essentially marked by a certain amount of seriousness with which we like to stand by them.

Thus, the above stated features conjointly provide us with a schema which may help us in distinguishing ethical statements from factual as well as non-ethical value statements. Some of these may, however, be shared by the latter but all of them together are found in ethical statements alone. Generally speaking, non-moral value statements lack features nos. 2. and 6, and may be very weak in expressing nos. 3 and 5.

NOTES

1. Though Mill has sometimes been severely criticised for obliterating this distinction, he has made it in a strikingly Humean passage in *A System of Logic*. pp. 619-20.
2. See his article, 'Good and Evil', *Analysis*, 17 (1956).
3. See 'Moral Beliefs', *PAS*, 1958.
4. Here it may be relevant to refer to yet another sort of descriptivism offered by Kovesi..Moral judgements, he holds, are like factual statements with the only difference that statements of fact describe some facts while ethical statements describe values. See his *Moral Notions*, 1967 (Routledge & Kegan Paul).
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