

## THE NATURE OF MORAL PRINCIPLES

Ethical considerations of the fundamental moral problems lead towards different types of ethical theories. Can we say that all ethical theories concern similar objects, or is it that ethical theories discuss different things? It is dubitable that two moral philosophers will think of same thing in one way. One fundamental moral question 'What ought to be done' has been answered in several ways. Since, moral problems are diverse and at the same time enormous in type so it is not always easy to decide to which type a given particular case belongs. Two moral philosophers will refer to different problems in accordance with a principle or a set of principles. The difficulty about what ought to be done is a matter of decision and not of passing judgment on something which has already been done. As there are so many moral problems so are the principles to resolve and then justify them.

Before we touch the problem of decision making process of principles we should make a clear distinction between moral problems and factual ones. All those statements which involve such words as good, bad, right, wrong, ought and duty are not always moral in character because of the different uses of terms. We apply 'moral' to attitude, feelings, actions, conduct, behaviour and so on. In order to understand the nature of moral problems one will have to give meaning to the term 'moral' which over-wears several meanings. For, the term 'moral' can be applied to several things which may increase the complexity of data of ethics. The question can be settled by giving answer to the question how moral use of a term is different from that of its non-moral use.

We should separate moral problems from personal ones which are basically psychological in nature. Even if 'moral' were to execute and assert certain facts regarding conduct, there still remains a difference between moral facts and other facts. Even if we could give an emotive meaning to moral terms we could still make a distinction between moral and non-moral expression of

emotions. For instance, Moore maintains that 'Good' is different from 'the good'. A moral philosopher must not confuse a thing which is called the good and the nature of 'good' itself. A person, who tries to explain the nature of the term 'good' in terms of the object for which it is used, is accused of committing naturalistic fallacy.<sup>1</sup> Good cannot be substituted for an object. It does not stand for the object but it is used to commend. The very meaning of 'good' is to commend, to prescribe and hence, it functions in regulating conduct of human beings.

Traditional moral philosophers offered certain ultimate principles to regulate and guide conduct. They did not recognize different functions to be played by a moralist and a moral philosopher. There is nothing wrong for a moral philosopher to moralize but he is not confined to this job. For traditional moral philosophers there are certain pre-given principles taken for granted which would determine the nature of human conduct. If we say that a moral problem must be concerned with making decisions which is an intellectual inquiry we cannot say that they are absolute in nature. For any ultimate principle will not leave room for freedom to think. In such situations we will remain where we were earlier in relation to the problem how we arrive at and recognize so called ultimate principles and how do they check, affect and change our attitudes.

What do we mean by terms like directing, changing and regulating? Is it merely telling someone what to do? Guiding someone else's conduct must not mean deciding for others, rather it is to decide for oneself; for, it is to think (imagine) oneself in the situations under which the guidance seeker is going. Guiding one's or that of others attitudes means making up one's own mind. Whether it is a guidance-seeker or a guide, he makes a deliberate choice. One may be fully at the consent of someone else intelligibly or by merely copying his way of life. In the former case he decides for himself but not in the latter. Copying others without making oneself sure of the possible effects of the action cannot help deciding and consequently in regulating behaviour. A moral philosopher is one who decides for oneself in view of certain moral principles. Freedom to decide is basic and fundamental condition to regulate and control human behaviour. Thus, we can say that a person, who never decides for himself but always acts

under the dictates of others and obeys the instructions given by them, cannot be called a moral philosopher. A moral philosopher must be capable of understanding the nature of principles that he opts for to guide his or other's behaviour.

But again we find that the term behaviour is used in a broad and loose sense which will include all sorts of actions reflex, intended, unintended, rational, irrational, passionate and so on.<sup>2</sup> The variety of ways, in which the term behaviour is used, makes its meaning ambiguous. In order to come out of this complexity we will have to come out of the muddle of ambiguity of meanings. In other words we will have to clarify the meaning of the term behaviour when we use it in moral sense. In autonomous activities, behaviour may mean breathing, sneezing or itching or comforting oneself by moving limbs unintentionally; while psychologically one may mean by behaviour, a responsive activity i. e., we just respond to the present stimuli. This stimulus-response theory does not leave any room for choice and decision but our actions are determined and controlled by external stimuli. A moral philosopher is not concerned with such a notion of behaviour which involves reflex activities or determined activities which cannot be counted as intelligible. A moral philosopher is concerned with intended, rational and deliberate activity. Moral action is not a mere response to outer situations but a voluntary and deliberate decision. It is this deliberate decision which modifies one's principles. A moral philosopher is not at all bothered about reflex activities or determined behaviour for one cannot be held responsible for such actions because they cannot be changed at any cost. Therefore there is no sense in talking about decisions. We talk about decisions and changing attitudes only in so far as we have something more than responding to situations in one particular manner. This ability to think for oneself, to think of all the possible effects which could take place under such and such situation makes a man a human being. A moral philosopher, therefore, we can say, is not at all concerned with naturally determined behaviour which will include acts of sneezing, breathing or itching and so on. But he concerns himself with deliberate actions (here too, his actions are determined but by his own free choice) where his rational faculty plays fundamental role in making decisions with regard to moral problems and principles

which could be applied to them under certain situations. Man is not always bound to respond to a stimulus in one particular way. It is this consciousness or deliberation or awareness of mind which makes a man say 'he could have done otherwise.' That is why we do not speak of animal behaviour while talking of principles or guiding one's behaviour. Since, animals cannot think, they cannot be held responsible for their actions. For, they do not have principles to choose and obey. They act on instincts and will do in the same manner as they have been doing in the past. But man's behaviour is not so determined. He can choose to act in different manners though within limited boundaries.

Human conduct, as we know, is not controlled and regulated only in one way. As man can think for himself so he can use various means to control human conduct. It can be controlled by making propaganda, persuasion, advice, guidance, training, threat or by bribing or forcing one to act in particular way. But, as we have already maintained that a man is different from animals because of his rational faculty and he does not live like cattle or cabbages, he can always choose the way to live by. And here too, we must make a distinction between voluntary and involuntary action. If we stand by our own consent, that in order to be a moral philosopher one must be capable of deciding for oneself, we cannot call a man a moral philosopher who acts under threat without his own assent. Even if he copies someone else's way of life he must be capable of understanding the nature of principles which he ascribes to his actions. Adherence to a rule whether decided by oneself or by others needs its full understanding and acceptance. An animal, at the most, can be trained to act in certain particular ways but a man, being intelligible, can think for himself even under ever-changing situations. Man's activities cannot be determined and controlled in the manner in that of an animal. It is true, that in the beginning, sometimes a man is taught certain principles where he has nothing to share. For example, a child, who just does not know the meaning of 'good' or 'bad' he uses them in the manner in which he is told. But later on when he starts understanding the meaning of the term we can use it in different ways for different things. Similarly, at the preliminary stage, a man who does not know how to

drive a car, may be told certain rules of driving but he can always operate them in divergent ways as required of the situations. These rules are not rigid but dynamic and flexible in nature. It is not at all to think of new rules every time but once learnt, rules can be applied even if some new situations occur. Even when new situations occur, we do not always change our old rules but we just think over the problem and modify them according to the new situations. Therefore, we can hold that a man is always free to decide ' what he ought to do ' under such and such situations.<sup>3</sup>

From the above discussion, we can conclude, that main function of moral philosophy is to regulate human conduct and regulation amounts to mean the acceptance of certain moral principles which involves a decision-making process.<sup>4</sup> With regard to moral principles one needs clarity of meaning that one attaches to terms used in the principle itself. A principle is applicable in so far as it is understood and interpreted by others the way in which the speaker understands it. It is the correct understanding of the language of principles which enables human beings to communicate the idea behind principles and in effect which helps in controlling human conduct later on. Any moral theory which tries to seek its affirmation without making clear the signs and symbols used in moral principles, starts on a wrong track. We must clearly distinguish between facts and values. Values may have three dimensions : empirical, normative and conceptual. However, normative study of morality is not free from empirical study. Empirical aspect of values include social sciences which are factual in nature and they just describe the nature of performed actions. Empirical study of value is systematized, ordered and factual. Here, one has just to gather information regarding the performed action in virtue of the consequences. Normative study of values on the other hand, speaks of certain ultimate principles which take refuge on the empirical data. A normative thinker does not make a sharp distinction between facts and values. Normative enquirer has to refer to actual attitudes and dispositions of the doer. He takes some basic values for granted which he calls as self-evident and therefore need not be put to test for justification. For an empirical scientist and a normative thinker there is always a certain goal to arrive at. An empirical scientist reaches

his goal by analyzing problem in terms of values of observed factual data, while a normative thinker proceeds with certain pre-given basic principles which he thinks are valuable in themselves. A normative enquirer is concerned with proposing a scheme of values. The normative study of values is not free from empirical studies and knowledge of facts. When we call a thing valuable it is not valuable in-itself. A principle cannot be taken for granted which could be applied to anything under any situation. It is the judgment passed on certain actions, which may help in deciding for principles. A normative enquirer should know what actually could be implemented. As such it is only factual knowledge which will support the acceptance of certain principles.

Conceptual study of value, on the other hand, questions the nature of principles and activity themselves. It explores the meaning of the terms that we use in moral principles and judgments. These three aspects of value are not logically exclusive of each other. Social scientist, however, has to touch the problems in normative and conceptual study. Conceptualization may stand first in the sequence because unless we are clear about the meanings of the terms, we will not be able to know values correctly. Empirical study of values will be misleading if not taken care by conceptual analysis of values. And on the other hand conceptual study of values will have to refer to facts which will serve as the criteria to justify the nature of meaning of the term that one gives to the term while using it in some principle or judgment.

Ethical terms, normally have an imperative function.<sup>5</sup> For instance, 'this is good' may stand for 'you ought to do this' or 'approve of this'. The sentence, 'this is good' is the evaluation of some action, thing, event or conduct which at the same time implies an advice to other to do the same thing if they fall under same situation. But 'you ought to do this,' or 'approve of this,' have a further direct function of prescribing and commending which, we find, is implicit in 'this is good.' What is indirectly suggested by the first is given directly by the second. And here again, we can use, so called moral terms in a non-moral sense. As in the case of 'you ought not to smoke here at this particular time' may have purely non-moral use of the term 'ought'. This principle is prescribed because of certain factual reasons, one of

which may be that it is harmful for the patient sitting next to the smoker. Or, to have another example, 'this is a good pen' may have certain non-moral reasons for the use of the term 'good' that it has a nice colour which one likes most and writes with a flow, and the shape is beautiful and so on. Number of such characteristics could be multiplied. 'Good' is given an adjectival meaning in such cases where it attributes certain qualities of a thing. And we attribute qualities to a thing when we make statements about them. Moral language, in this sense, will be regarded as making statements which are likely to be true or false. But do we attribute certain qualities to things by using ethical terms in moral principles and judgments? It becomes apparently true that while making moral judgments, to some extent, we do explain and describe facts. By saying this is good, bad, right or wrong we certainly make judgment on something where descriptive function of ethical language is primary to make sense of what we mean by such terms.

From this, it follows, that evaluation of something is different from its description.<sup>6</sup> We call a thing good for certain characteristics and therefore 'good' could be given meaning only in the realm of these factual characteristics. We certainly give reasons to justify something to which we apply terms like good or bad. But it will not at all be fair to say that we describe something by saying it is good or bad. It is different from saying something is red or yellow. There is no grammatical dissimilarity between 'this is good' and 'this is yellow', but the two sentences have different functions to perform. Former is to recommend, to evaluate, to appraise, whereas latter is just to describe, inform and explain. Good or bad are not terms like yellow or red which could be given ostensible definitions. These are like sincere, honest, nice, dishonest, cruel and so on. When we are told that someone is good, and if we understand the meaning of good clearly, we at once may assert his judgment, or may answer, 'I do not know him, so I cannot say so'. Even if we do not know the person being talked of, still we can understand that the person is being commended or favoured or approved of. We at once make an image of the good person without having any information regarding the qualities and characteristics that the person owns. We may acquire some information about the goodness of the

person by inference from our previous knowledge which could be attached to a good person. But this will not do unless we understand the meaning of the term good itself which is absolutely different from the characteristics which we refer to, for giving reasons to support our judgment. A person may be called good by different people for different reasons but the meaning of the term 'good' remains the same forever for everyone. It is to be understood that ethical words are appraisal words which are used to advice, to guide, to regulate conduct. But this is not true of something which we call yellow or red.

Therefore, we can say, that ethical terms are primarily evaluative and more in the nature of imperatives.<sup>7</sup> And these imperatives have no similarity with grammatical imperatives. They are not direct commands but suggestions or quasi-imperatives. A moral imperative does not command one to act in a particular way but advises one to act in accordance with certain principles which one decides for oneself under certain circumstances. 'Do so and so' is in imperative mood, speaking grammatically which is shared by moral imperatives too when we implement some principle. 'You ought to do this' is not a mere echo of the words but it is a prescription given to others that if I were in such and such a situation I would have done like this. So it has an element of command in itself.

To evaluate something is not only to use terms like 'good' or 'bad'; or to accept or reject a principle of conduct is not merely to say yes or no to it. We keep evaluating all sorts of things like tables, chairs, books and so on just for certain psychological reasons. In such cases, it becomes a matter of taste, like, or dislike, therefore of preference. For one thing may be preferred by one in virtue of personal taste or for certain sentimental reasons which we must distinguish from evaluation. To say something is 'good' because it is liked by someone will hinder generalizing the judgment. When a person is overpowered by his emotions and sentiments with regard to something and does not let himself generalize his judgments, his attitudes cannot be called moral. For moral principles have to be public.

Moral choice is not a mere matter of taste. Deciding for moral principles excludes sentimentality from its domain. Mo-



ral evaluations differ from non-moral ones but they share the common quality of generalization with non-moral evaluations. To say something is good is to say that I and others rate it higher than other things. The point is that whenever we evaluate something moral or non-moral we have a standard to apply for evaluation i. e., if I commend a person's action or a thing or a particular case I become committed to my commendation that I will always commend it in future too and will act according to it if confronted with same cases in similar situations and conditions. 'You ought to do it' whether in moral or non moral cases implies a principle that the speaker will meet with similar sort of cases under similar situations in similar way. Thus, a moral principle is not a personal command or an imperative as recognized by grammar or what one wants to be done; neither, it is a desirous activity that it is an expression of wish that someone would work in such and such way. Therefore moral principles are universal in nature.<sup>8</sup> The effect of acting in accordance with certain principle is to acquire a particular attitude towards actions.

How do we arrive at principles? Do we get them in theoretical realm or practical realm as they have dual status of belonging both to theory and practice?<sup>9</sup> It often happens that we perform actions without knowing the principles working at the root of the action. In such cases practice precedes principles. It does not mean that action is not guided by any principle but the principle which is not known at the time of acting gets recognition later on. Here, patterns of activity follow principles unreflectively. The principle which was not explicitly formulated in theory becomes authoritative when a person is asked to give reasons for acting in a certain way or doing something, or calling a thing good or bad. For, it does not always require knowledge of moral principles in order to be moral as it is not a necessary condition to know the principles of logic in order to be good a argumentator. A man may be a good argumentator without studying the laws of thought. But laws are always there even when they are not discovered by the argumentator. Implicit principles become explicit by learning them by reflection on practice, by observing what we did in the past, through experience. Once principles are recognized they simultaneously become authoritative.

There is no dispute regarding the nature of inquiry or decision that it begins with some existing body of thought and practice.

Any inquiry or decision that we make will force us to see its applicability in the light of past activity. Therefore, function of decision is to provide a source or basis for ultimate principles which themselves are not deduced from greater generality. Either we justify moral judgment by relating the facts of the case, or by approaching the principle or a set of principles. On being challenged we may give some more general principles until we reach some ultimate principles which may not be deduced from still higher principle. But there may remain the possibility of dispute. It is possible to think of such ultimate principles only in theory but not in practice. To think of such an ultimate principle would amount to saying that it does not need further reasons for justification.

Lastly, principles and rules are often used synonymously. But two of them have different connotations. Rules are not commendatory and prescriptive, while referring to a principle in this or that particular activity we have already committed ourselves to the principle.<sup>10</sup> A rule is descriptive and informative but principle is the endorsement of speaker which involves the element of commitment. As such, evaluation not only requires mere rules but principles which could be recognized by reflection on practice and modified in view of new or changing circumstances. We keep applying working principles until we reach some more general principle.

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#### NOTES

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