

MORALITY AND SCEPTICISM: A CRITICAL STUDY

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"... the threat of skepticism is what keeps the theory of knowledge going".

-Barry Stroud

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Preface

I was drawn to the theme of this project work by my observation of widespread scepticism about values, particularly moral values, not only among intellectuals, but also among common people. And that created a curiosity in mind about the rationality of scepticism in morality. The theme of my project is an attempt to come to grips with it.

*Since Descartes' *Meditations* many philosophers in the West have been concerned to defend the rationality of our beliefs from the threat of scepticism about our knowledge of the external world. The idea that there might be nothing which we know, or more radically, which we have even the slightest reason to believe, is one that many philosophers have thought to be deserving of serious attention. It seems somewhat surprising; therefore, that there has not been similar attention given to what one might call the application of scepticism to morality. Mine is a humble attempt to address this problem here. I have not said anything strikingly new. Rather, I have tried to restate, reanalyze positions and arguments, clarify concepts and theories in the area of moral scepticism, and add critical comments in defending my contention that scepticism in relation to morality is not sustainable.*

In my work I have used the spelling 'scepticism'. Although, the spelling 'skepticism', wherever it occurs in the literature, is kept intact. In Chapter I, which is the introductory chapter I

have made a general survey of scepticism. In Chapter II, the issue of moral scepticism is taken up and its varieties are distinguished. The ways in which epistemological scepticism and moral scepticism are similar and different are also discussed. One aspect of this Chapter is a discussion of Moore's view in the *Principia Ethica* as providing impetus to both epistemological and ontological moral scepticism.

In the third chapter, the different arguments defending moral scepticism directly and indirectly are stated and elaborated. In Chapter IV these arguments are considered with a view to examine their cogency.

The concluding remark is an overview of what has been done in the main exposition.

S. M. Rakibuz Zaman
(S.M. Rakibuz Zaman)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this work of mine I would try to analyze scepticism in its relation to morality and examine its viability. Though, the problem of moral scepticism has its own specific character and questions, yet it is located within the broader framework of philosophical scepticism. Hence, we shall begin with a general account of what scepticism is, tracing its development from the ancient to the modern times. Needless to say, scepticism is a recurrent philosophical concern. It prevails from the ancient period to the contemporary times. Philosophical enquiry in general and epistemological enquiry in particular are not complete or even, one may say, cannot get started, without answering or silencing the sceptical doubt. Scepticism is not something to be bypassed or ignored.

Scepticism has taken different forms down the ages and the arguments used by the sceptic are equally diverse. Thematically, however, scepticism is basically scepticism about knowledge. It doubts every kind of thing people claim to know, namely, that there is an external world, that other people have experiences, that there is self-knowledge – (knowledge of the internal world), that there is moral knowledge or that there are moral values, that we can know or justify the belief that God exists and so on. Scepticism touches all these things, but in different ways and with different effects. In case of the external world, the question raised by the sceptic is, how can we know any of the things we say about the world to be true. In the case of other minds, the problem, perhaps, is not so much about how do we know that other people have feelings as we do, but how much do we really know about these feelings. For, the possibility of shamming cannot be ruled out. Regarding self-knowledge, the doubt is

about whether the supposed owner of the experiences is an immaterial mind or a physical body or a brain-in-vat.

It is difficult to define scepticism precisely, but some broad characterization can be stated by attending to the etymology of the word, as has been noted by R.G. Burry¹. The word 'skeptic' means simply 'an inquirer' or 'an investigator'. Etymologically understood, the word 'scepticism' is derived *via* Latin, from a Greek term '*skeptics*', that means "to seek" and also "a seeker", "one who seeks" and such like. The term 'skeptic' (from Greek '*skeptikos*') stands for a person who performs a much wider range of activities: he is thoughtful, reflective; he examines, inquires, considers and looks about carefully². Etymologically, then, a sceptic is an inquirer, or one who reflects. In this sense, we should all be proud to be called sceptics. This ancient meaning of scepticism, etymologically derived, however, fails to capture either the nature of the initial stages of the sceptical tradition in Greek philosophy or the current usage of the term in everyday discourse and in philosophical literature. Certainly, the sceptic inquires into various topics, but what is distinctive about his inquiry is that it focuses upon the question of whether or not we can have knowledge of the subject matter under examination, and concludes that either knowledge is not possible, or that, even if we are in possession of knowledge, we cannot establish that we are.

Scepticism has a long history. We have already mentioned that. It is found in all ages and climes. From the historical dimension, for example, the two most influential forms of scepticism, have, arguably, been the radical epistemological scepticism of the classical Pyrrhonian sceptics and the Cartesian form of radical epistemological scepticism that Descartes considers in his *Meditations*. The spirit of

both these historical approaches lives on in the contemporary discussion of scepticism. Before we take them up for discussion in some details, we shall provide a sketch of other skeptics that flourished in the Greek tradition.

I

Historically, sceptical tendencies could be found in pre-Socratic philosophy. The seeds of scepticism in the form of human inability to discover any fixed, immutable truth about reality beyond the universal flux are found in the metaphysical theory of Heraclitus. Cratylus, from this view, led to a broader scepticism and held that communication was impossible because, since the speaker, the auditor, and the words were changing, whatever meaning might have been intended by the words would be altered by the time they were heard³. Xenophanes denied the existence of any criteria of true knowledge. For him, if man, by chance, came across the truth, he would not be able to distinguish it from error since there is no criterion for the same.⁴ The sophists, for example, Gorgias and Protagoras, then raised some serious sceptical doubts. Gorgias is said to have doubted whether anything existed. He claimed that if anything existed, we could not know it and if we could know it, we could not communicate it⁵. The sceptical tendency is also found in Protagoras' dictum – 'Man is the measure of all things' (*Homo Mensura*). The conclusion of *homo mensura* not only shows the relativism of knowledge, but also its universality as an impossibility. Thus, truth is what appears to be true for each individual human being. No knowledge is valid for everyone. In other words, there is no absolute knowledge which is acceptable to everyone. What is true for one individual man, and whatever is false for another may turn out to be false or true for someone else⁶. Later Sophists like Polus, Thrasymachus and Critius denied objectivity in moral codes, in principles of politics, etc.

In the ancient Greek thought two varieties of scepticism are distinguished – the academic scepticism and the Pyrrhonian scepticism. Plato, though himself not a sceptic, deals extensively with it in his dialogues, *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*, thereby implying that scepticism was a dominant tendency in his time, and he had to take them in his stride. Scepticism as a philosophical methodology was developed from the Socratic observation, “All I know is that I know nothing,” by the leaders like Arcesilaus (c.315 – c.240 B.C.) and Carneades (c. 213 – 128 B.C.) of Plato’s Academy in the 3rd century B.C. That gave birth to what is called Academic Scepticism. It is so-called because it originated in Plato’s Academic. The attack of Arcesilaus was directed primarily against the Stoics and that of Carneades against both Epicureans and Stoics⁷. Popkin in this regard writes:

The Stoics had claimed that there were some perceptions which could not possibly be false either *per se* or as signs of the true nature of reality. Arcesilaus and Carneades pointed out that there was no criterion for distinguishing a perception of this kind from one that appeared to be so, or was thought to be so. Carneades insisted that there were no intrinsic marks or signs which these so-called real propositions possessed, and that no justifiable criterion existed for separating one type from the other. Therefore, he contended, we must suspend judgment about whether reliable reorientations of objects actually exist. This state of affairs, the Academics maintained, showed that no assertions about what is going on beyond or immediate

experience are certain. The best data that we can acquire, they said, only tell us what is reasonable or possible, but not what is true.⁸

These arguments have come down to us, especially in the writings of Cicero, Diogenes Laertius and Saint Augustine. The aim of the Academic sceptical philosophers was to show, by a group of arguments and dialectical puzzles, that the dogmatic philosopher (i.e., the philosopher who asserts that he knows some truth about the real nature of things), could not know with absolute certainty the propositions he said he knew. The Academics formulated a series of difficulties to show that the information we gain by means of our senses may be unreliable, that we possess no guaranteed criterion or standard for determining which of our judgments is true and which false. As a result, the Academic sceptics said that nothing is certain; everything is probable⁹.

In the second century B.C., the sceptical activity moved from the Academy to the Pyrrhonian sceptics. Pyrrhonism had its beginning in the legendary figure of Pyrrho of Elis (c.360 – c. 270 B.C), who was an unmitigated sceptic. He was claimed to be the founder of scepticism. Pyrrho, who lived even before the first Academic sceptic Arcesilaus (c.315 – c. 240 B.C.), developed scepticism as a philosophical methodology, and served as the figurehead of sceptical philosophers. Pyrrho left no writings but was, rather, the model of the sceptical way of life. The stories about him indicate that he tried to avoid committing himself to doctrines about the nature of reality while living according to appearances and attempting to attain happiness, or at least peace of mind. Pyrrhonism, as a theoretical formulation of scepticism rather than merely an emulation of Pyrrho, is supposed to have begun with Aenesidemus, who

probably taught in Alexandria in the first Century B.C. He is reported to have attacked both the Academics because they were sure that what is probable and what is improbable are distinguishable, and the dogmatic philosophers because they thought they had discovered truth. Pyrrhonian scepticism is usually contrasted with “dogmatism” which simply meant “subscription to dogmas or doctrines”. Unlike the dogmatist, who quits the philosophical inquiry once he has accepted particular doctrines, the sceptic continues the search¹⁰. There are minor skeptics of the Pyrrhonian School who have contributed in different intensities to the skeptical movement. It is only in the works of Sextus Empiricus that a full presentation of Pyrrhonian sceptics appears, with all of their dialectical weapons employed against so many philosophical theories. Hardly anything is known about the life of Sextus. It is surmised that he lived in the second century CE. He wrote in Greek. His best known work, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, contains a collection of almost all the arguments that sceptics have ever offered to show that we do not possess the knowledge, we think we do. *The Outlines*, not known to the mediaval philosophers, surfaced in the sixteenth century, and has a tremendous impact on subsequent philosophy¹¹.

Sextus was equally against the Academics and the dogmatics. The Academic sceptic says that nothing is certain; everything is probable. The dogmatic holds that he knows some truth about the real nature of things. Sextus who defines “dogma” as “assent to non-evident proposition”¹², regards doubt as a cure for the disease called dogmatism. But unlike academic scepticism which comes to a negative dogmatic conclusion from its doubt, Pyrrhonian scepticism makes no such assertion, either affirmative or negative. It was Sextus’s view that the Academic skeptics were not really sceptics, but were actually negative dogmatists. He also presented a battery of

Pyrrhonian arguments against the stoic contention that there are indicative signs in experience that indubitably reveal what is the case beyond experience.

In his *Pyrrhonianum Hypotyposes* and *Adversus Mathematicos*, Sextus Empiricus (c. 200 A.D.) set forth the Pyrrhonian tropes, as to why one should suspend judgement about all claims to knowledge extending beyond immediate experience. We want to add a clarification of the term ‘tropes’. It is a transliteration of the Greek term ‘*tropos*’, which some translators prefer to translate as “ten modes”. ‘*Tropos*’ has a technical sense meaning a pattern of argument or schemata of argument, although in ordinary Greek ‘*tropos*’ means simply ‘way’ or ‘manner’. However, what is important is the modes or tropes are in fact patterns or schemata which constitute ways inducing scepticism. We find Sextus speaking in terms of ten tropes of suspension of judgment and reporting on five tropes of Agrippa¹³.

In Pyrrho and his followers scepticism has taken the shape of a theory which says we never have good grounds for adopting a definite position on anything because for every ground in favor of a doctrine or claim there is an equally strong argument against the doctrine or claim. And all this argumentation, Sextus stated, was to lead mankind to the Pyrrhonian goal of *ataraxia* (unperturbedness). Sextus says:

The man who determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly, and, in consequence, he is unperturbed.¹⁴

While describing scepticism Sextus says:

Skepticism is an ability or mental attitude which opposes appearances to judgments, in any way

whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects of reason thus opposed, we are brought directly first to a state of “unperturbedness” or quietude (*ataraxia*).¹⁵

In this sense, Pyrrhonian scepticism is the thesis that no opinion is permissible as final. The Pyrrhonian sceptic refuses to take any position. He urges that this conclusion is inescapable as long we hold any pretension to rational belief whatsoever, and, therefore, enjoins suspension of judgments i.e., *epoché*.

This appears to be absurd. The sceptic is threatened with a serious, indeed fundamental incoherence. He makes use of arguments; he is thereby committed, at least provisionally, to accepting the conclusions of those arguments as true. The sceptic rejects all proofs, and sets no store by argumentative procedures, and yet *epoché* is apparently brought about by argument, by reflecting that nothing can be said on either side of the question. The sceptic, however, has nothing to fear from a demonstration that his conclusion is absurd. For, as is wellknown his aim is not to establish any thesis but to induce universal suspension of judgments. *Epoché* is indeed an effect of argument but that need only mean that it is caused by argument. We do not add up the pros and cons, and find that they balance. Rather we find nothing to be said pro or con; we examine the argument but on examination they turn out to be no more persuasive than otherwise, and hence, *epoché* results. I do not conclude to anything. But having no conclusion itself amounts to *epoché*. *Epoché* is not, then, some further intellectual conclusion which the skeptic then reaches.

It is in this context that Sextus introduces his famous comparison of the sceptical slogan with purgative drugs – once they have done their job they flush

themselves out as well. Scepticism is like a great purge that eliminates everything including itself¹⁶. Sextus wrote:

And just as purgative medicines expel themselves together with the substances already present in the body, so these [skeptical] arguments are capable of cancelling themselves along with the other arguments which are said to be probative. Nor is this preposterous, since in fact the dictum 'Nothing is true' not only refutes every other saying but also nullifies itself as well.¹⁷

This is an intellectual equivalent of the suicide bomber that annihilates oneself along with the enemy.

As is well known, Sextus' aim is not to establish any thesis but to induce universal suspension of judgments. In all fairness to the sceptic it can be said that he represents an attitude of open-mindedness; stops taking side and withholds judgments. The sceptic's questionings never come to a state of rest or equilibrium; rather it is the fact that they never come to rest, but continually turn over without arriving at definite conclusions. That produces *epoché* and by consequence *ataraxia* (tranquility or calmness of mind). *Epoché* is a sort of condition supervenient upon continuous investigation (not to be characterized by the intense, manic and pathological thrust for the genuine answers), not a conclusion to that investigation. The sceptic is, in this sense, perpetually traveling hopefully, never arriving – but, since whether or not he arrives no longer matters to him, the condition is perfectly calm and squares perfectly with Sextus' actual account of the relation between *epoché* and *ataraxia* – the latter

simply comes along as the unforeseen result of the former, itself the unforeseen result of the inquiry.

To follow back the career of ancient scepticism is interesting and instructive from the historical point of view. But there is also some non-historical interest. According to some scholars of ancient scepticism, from a philosopher's point of view, the most spectacular testimony to Sextus' influence is to be found in the writings of Descartes. The arguments which Descartes and his successors expound and criticize are almost all to be found in the ancient texts¹⁸. "But there is much more in the pages of Sextus than Descartes indicates, and a philosophical reader who troubles to go back to Sextus will find at the very least a greater abundance of skeptical argumentation than modern discussion would lead him to imagine"¹⁹.

There is another point which is philosophically interesting. Modern scepticism frequently represents itself as issuing a challenge to knowledge. But the sceptical challenge leads all our beliefs intact provided that we do not claim that our beliefs amount to knowledge. Nevertheless, we are justified in holding them. The ancient sceptics, particularly the more orthodox and rigorous Pyrrhonian sceptics such as Sextus Empiricus, not merely argued that man is unable to achieve knowledge, but also denied that he can attain any such things as reasonable belief. Under the all-out sceptical pressure, our beliefs turn out to be groundless, and that we have no more reason to believe than to disbelieve.

What is more, ancient sceptics are not mere pieces of antiquity. The Pyrrhonians are repeatedly referred to by both believers in knowledge as well as the sceptics in contemporary philosophy. For instance, Roderick M. Chisholm in different editions of his *Theory of Knowledge*²⁰, mentions Sextus Empiricus several times both

in the way of a discussion of scepticism, preliminary to his epistemological theory and also for the analysis of epistemic concepts, for example, “counterbalanced”, “perceptual relativity”, etc. We may also cite the work of Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticism*.²¹ This book argues for a sceptical thesis within a broad framework of ancient scepticism. It has two main conclusions: Pyrrhonian moral scepticism – we should suspend judgment on the question whether any moral beliefs are *epistemically* justified and moderate moral scepticism – moral beliefs can be “moderately justified” but not “extremely justified”. Sinnott-Armstrong suggests a number of ways one might gain modest justification to believe some moral propositions. Sinnott-Armstrong calls the conjunction of these claims moderate Pyrrhonian scepticism.

We have chosen just two instances; there are many more. This shows that ancient sceptics still keep the contemporary philosophers engage in their theses.

While doubt in modern scepticism is called philosophical doubt or “hyperbolic doubt” *a la* Descartes, ancient scepticism was practical doubt, and it was straightforwardly incompatible with any prospect of rational action, that is, action based on justifiably held reasons. That claim appears extravagant and as barely coherent to the modern mind. Philosophical doubt does not affect action. The modern sceptic has generally recognized that man must act to survive and thrive in the world – that we humans find ourselves placed in an environment which will not satisfy our needs, want and desires automatically, without the intervention of activity on our part. David Hume has put the point as follows:

But a Pyrrhonian... must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail.

All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence ... Nature is always too strong for principle.²²

Hume's remark is irrelevant for modern sceptic's insulated doubt and marks the seriousness of the ancient variety.

II

In the history of scepticism a new phase began with the philosophy of René Descartes. In Descartes we have the emphasis on scepticism as a method. We must mention the distinction between the sceptical position and the sceptical method or the method of doubt. For a genuine sceptic, sceptical doubts destroy the validity of experience or reason, if he would not resort to other ways of knowing (including revelation, faith, intuition) as a way out of his sceptical doubt. He has no intention to retrieve or reconstruct what is destroyed by his sceptical doubt. But when the method of doubt is applied by Augustine or Descartes, there are positive reconstructive ends in view. Descartes' systematic exercise of doubt is a method, designed to clear out the rubble of preconceived opinions, often based on unreliable sources or unscrutinized presuppositions. From the testimony of senses to the fundamental truths of mathematics nothing is exempted from the snare of doubt. Descartes presents his scepticism in the form of sceptical hypothesis – in the form of a malicious power that deceives our senses and undermines the justification of knowledge otherwise accepted as justified. At the end of the first *Meditation*, he writes, "I will suppose ... that some evil demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies to deceive

me”²³. Descartes saw scepticism as disease of epidemic magnitude: his whole philosophical activity was given to the search for a cure.

It is well known that Descartes’ scepticism or method of doubt was initial. He was searching after certainty. It has been observed, “Before Descartes there had been Skeptics, but who were only Skeptics. Descartes taught his age the art of making skepticism give birth to Certainty”.²⁴ The torrents of doubt are checked by the rock of certainty encountered at the start of the second *Meditation*. The meditator’s indubitable knowledge of his own existence as a thinking being: I am thinking, therefore, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by the self. This is Descartes’ Archimedean point on which he proposes to build a new and reliable system of knowledge observing that the proposition was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptic were incapable of shaking it²⁵.

At the stage we must re-emphasize the distinction that has so often been made, the distinction, namely, between scepticism as a theory of justification and the method of doubt. Though Descartes is regarded as advancing the classical form of sceptical argument in *Meditation*, Book I, it is rightly pointed out that the doubt is but a methodological preliminary. He takes his doubt through a series of successively more radical theses and hypotheses, ranging from the ancient sceptical contentions about the fallibility of the senses through the life-but-a-dream argument to the hypothesis of the deceitful demon that unfailingly misleads us into accepting error for knowledge. However, the scepticism induced by illusions, dreams and demons is only the initial chapter in Descartes’ philosophy. His main aim and interest does not end at this negative stage but, looks beyond it to the foundation of a rational program of positive cognition to which scepticism is but a methodological preliminary²⁶. The argument

that Descartes considers will establish at best a very weak form of scepticism, viz., the thesis that no belief about the external world is indubitably certain. As Bernard Williams shows, Descartes is here engaged, not in any ordinary search for the truth, but in a 'pure enquiry', abstracted from all exigencies of limited time and practical needs, where nothing matters except maximizing the ratio of true to false beliefs²⁷. And to accomplish this task Descartes himself provisionally plays the role of a sceptic and doubts everything.

Descartes' method of doubt generated fresh sceptical tendencies which can be called anti-Cartesian. We may mention the names of Gassendi, and Pierre Bayle. Gassendi tried to reject the Cartesian resolution of scepticism by questioning whether Descartes' criterion could determine what was true or false. Anything that appears as clear and distinct to us may not really be clear and distinct. Gassendi pointed out that for all anyone could ascertain, the whole Cartesian system of truths might be only a subjective vision in somebody's mind and not a true picture of reality. Gassendi had challenged whether the Cartesian criterion could ever be successfully applied. But, Bayle went even further and challenged whether it was even the criterion of knowledge. He showed that the human effort to comprehend the world in rational terms always ended in perplexities, bewilderment and insoluble difficulties²⁸.

Exactly one hundred years since Descartes wrote *Meditations* in 1641, David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* was published in 1740. It is a devastating criticism of eighteenth century mentality that believes in the truth and progress of science and benefits to the progress of humanity. Hume was not satisfied with the euphoric intellectual atmosphere of the 18th century. His analysis revealed scepticism about man's ability to gain knowledge about anything beyond the immediately

obvious or demonstrable relationships of ideas. Hume showed that no truths about matters of fact could be established deductively or inductively. He once pointed out that inductive reasoning is inclusive, since its evidential value rests upon the assumption that nature is uniform, that the future will resemble the past. This assumption cannot itself be justified. Hume's version of scepticism centered the sceptical attack on the issues that were to dominate subsequent philosophy – the problems of induction, causality, external existence, nature of the self, and the proofs of the existence of God. He showed what was actually involved in the Pyrrhonian statement that the sceptic accepts beliefs by habit and custom and according to nature²⁹, since, for him, “Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel.”³⁰

Hume's scepticism was developed in Germany in the second half of the 18th century culminating in the critical philosophy of Kant, who famously said that Hume's scepticism roused him from his dogmatic slumber. Sceptical puzzlings worried Kant. He held that the sceptical method was an indispensable propaedeutic to critical dogmatism. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, there are as many as fourteen places where Kant significantly talked of scepticism. At one place, he said:

... the sceptic is ... the taskmaster who constrains the dogmatic response to develop a sound critique of the understanding and reason ... While... the skeptical procedure cannot of itself yield any *satisfying* answer to the question of reason, nonetheless it *prepares the way* by arousing reason to circumspection, and by indicating

the radical measures which are adequate to secure it in its legitimate possessions.³¹

Kant saw that Hume had fundamentally challenged the Enlightenment and hoped that all sceptical disputes could be settled by what Locke had called “the physiology of the understanding,” and that the question: “How is knowledge possible?” had to be reexamined. Kant’s solution can be considered as an attempt to establish a middle ground incorporating complete scepticism about metaphysical knowledge and a conviction that universal and necessarily certain knowledge existed as the conditions of all possible experience. He assumed that knowledge is possible, and hence total scepticism is false.³²

In the 20th century sceptical thinkers like Fritz Mauthner, George Santayana, Albert Camus and quasi-sceptical figure like Hans Vaihinger are the central figures. Mauthner, in the early part of the century, developed a type of scepticism from his work on the analysis of language. He contends that each language expresses a *Weltanschauung*, and what is considered as true in a language is always relative to this outlook. His critique of language led him into complete scepticism. Scepticism was offered by George Santayana, especially in his *Scepticism and Animal Faith*.³³ Santayana insisted that “nothing given exists as it is given,” and all our beliefs about what is given are open to question³⁴. Santayana writes:

I have imitated the Greek sceptics in calling doubtful everything that, in spite of common sense, any one can possibly doubt. But since life and even discussion forces me to break away from a complete scepticism, I have determined not to do so surreptitiously nor at

random, ignominiously taking cover now behind one prejudice and now behind another. Instead, I have frankly taken nature by the hand, accepting as a rule in my farthest speculations the animal faith I live by from day to day.³⁵

This is a strain of thought similar to Hume who has no reservation in urging us to live by a life of commonsense and practicality. But Santayana clearly differs from Hume in making an attempt to introduce a metaphysics of matter, essence, spirit, and truth of his own. Another form of 20th century scepticism is that of such existentialist thinkers as Albert Camus. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus portrays man as trying to measure the nature and meaning of an essentially absurd universe by means of questionable rational and scientific criteria. Camus regards the sceptical arguments used by Kierkegaard as showing the contradictory nature of human rational attempts to understand the world as decisive, but he rejects Kierkegaard's fideistic³⁶ solution, overcoming the sceptical crisis by "a leap into faith."³⁷

Scepticism is basically a methodological doctrine. But it can also be a way of life – the sceptic way of life. The sceptic will have no theoretical beliefs as far as philosophical argument is concerned. However, scepticism may be a philosophical position itself which is marked by the attitude not to accept the vain pretensions of the dogmatists. The main bulk of his argument is directed against such specific and identifiable targets. The question is what the sceptic is going to gain out of his

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perennial doubting. He is not succumbing to uncritical acceptance of knowledge claims. Dick Garner says:

The skeptic... will be engaged in a continuing (and perpetually unresolved) search for a definitive answer to each and every philosophical question that comes before him. He will (and Sextus did) amass a large stock of philosophical arguments of varying degrees of strength and plausibility, from which he may draw to support any side of each philosophical question. Sextus called these arguments 'Tropes'.³⁸

The quietude of the sceptic is only so-called. It may be compared to the peace of the well-armed man, always on guard and ready for combat, though with a reasonable expectation neither of victory nor defeat. It is not in the least like the quietude of the man for whom, in the words of Wittgenstein, "philosophical problems... *completely* disappear"³⁹. This is what makes the sceptic important for philosophy.

III

There are many references to sceptics (ajñānikaḥ) scattered throughout Indian literature but there is very little surviving philosophical scepticism. Indian position on scepticism is found in such systematic and basic Sanskrit texts as – Nāgārjuna's *Mādhyamikākarikā* and Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa's *Tattvopaplavasimha*.⁴⁰ Sriharśa's *Khaṇḍankhaṇḍakhādyā* is an important text in the history of Indian dialectics and scepticism. They represent three different philosophic traditions of India. The first is a Madhyāmika Buddhist, the second was either a materialist or an agnostic, the third

was an Advaita Vedāntin. As has been observed by B.K. Matilal, in spite of these differences, they shared a common style of philosophizing as well as a common attitude towards the discovery of truth, "... to be in the same way critical, skeptical, refutative and destructive".⁴¹ Professor Matilal has also mentioned Sañjaya who "questioned the knowledge claims of other *Śramaṇas* and *Brāhmaṇas* regarding certain moral, religious and metaphysical matters. Typical questions asked in those days "... were: 'Is there a soul?' 'Is there an after-life?' and 'What is right and what is wrong?' Sañjaya and his followers argued that it is impossible to *know* correct answers to such questions."⁴²

We intend to add a note on Nāgārjuna's scepticism in which the key argument is the negation of 'intrinsic nature' of things. In the section on *Āryasatyā Parīkṣā* of *Mādhyamikakārikā*, Nāgārjuna explores the crucial ideas of *śūnyatā*, *pratītyasamutpāda* and *madhyamā pratipad*. All things being void, there is neither a thing to be negated nor a negation. Things are naturally 'void of an intrinsic nature' (*svabhāvaśūnya*), being 'dependently originated' (*pratītyasamutpanna*). In other words, it has merely a therapeutic value. Nāgārjuna neither denies the world nor affirms it. We can only speak of a relational way of becoming. His is a middle path. He says:

yah pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe|

*sā prājñāptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā||*⁴³

We call that whatever is dependent origination or relational origination *śūnyatā* or voidness. It is a mere designation based on something and it is the middle way.

Negation of the 'intrinsic nature', with Nāgārjuna, is thus designated for dissipating the error of people who see an 'intrinsic nature' in the things while they

have none. According to Nāgārjuna, if voidness, that is, becoming is denied then the world itself is assumed to be the absolute, not born, not destroyed, immutable, free from the manifold states of its becoming:

*ajātam aniruddham ca kūtastham ca bhaviṣyati |
vicitrābhir avasthāvhiḥ svabhāve rahitam jagat||⁴⁴*

From the standpoint of self-existence, the world will be removed from the various conditions and it will be non-destructive, non-originative and immovable.

Nāgārjuna has to face the objection that if all things are void, how can our activities in the world become possible? This objection, Nāgārjuna says, springs from a fundamental misunderstanding of “voidness”, that is, “dependent origination”. All our activities are possible in the relational world of becoming. When “voidness” is denied there is nothing to be done, no work is undertaken; the agent does not do any work. He says:

*na kartavyam bhavet kiṃcid anārabhā bhavet kriyā |
kāraḥ syād akurvāṇaḥ śūnyatām pratibādhatāḥ||⁴⁵*

For one who destroys *śūnyatā* it will be like a doer without an action, a non-activating or with nothing to act upon.

The problem of assigning a kind of dialectic to Nāgārjuna is not easy. His logical disputations reduce all assertions to the category of ultimate absurdity. He has no ‘position’ to defend. His position in fact is ‘non-position’. The best way for him to refute his opponents’ criticism is to show the contradictions inherent in the latter’s way of thought. He is a *prāsaṅgika*, not a *svātantrikā* – he does not show any predilection for independent inference.

Thinkers like Jayarāśi and Sriharśa are regarded as sceptics because they question the validity of cognition by questioning the faultlessness of the conditioning factors. Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa adopts the technique of opposition without the establishment of any theory. His methodological approach is called *vitaṇḍā* in *Tattvopaplavasimha*. He criticizes the Nyāya theory of perception as *indriyārtha sannikarṣotpannam jñānam avyapadeśyam avyabhichāri vyavasāyātmakam pratyakṣam*,⁴⁶ on the ground that the appropriateness of the conditions such as *avyābhicāritva*, *vyavasāyātmakatva* and “sense-object-contact” (*indriyayarthā sannikarṣo*) can be known or can be coherently explain. He also criticizes the Nyāya theory of inference on the ground that the relation of invariable concomitance between *hetu* and *sādhya* (*vyāpti*) cannot be ascertained. He also refutes the Buddhist theory of perception as *avisambādakam* and Buddhist theory of inference based on *tādatmya* relation.

Even though Jayarāśi and Sriharśa differed in their metaphysical presupposition. Sriharśa’s refutation of justifiability of all definitions of valid cognition have basic similarity with Jayarāśi’s argument. What they agree upon is that there is a gap between the knowledge claims and the grounds of making these claims.⁴⁷ If knowledge is aimed at delivering truth then, all possibility of doubt should be eliminated. The problem is that this demand cannot be made. The sceptic’s is a “commitmentless denial” or *prasajya pratishedhaḥ*. His negation is not a logical argument, but a refutation which is compatible with non-asserting the thesis of one’s own. Such an attitude is clearly expressed in Nāgārjuna’s declaration *nāsti ca mama pratijñā*.⁴⁸

IV

In this section we consider it worthwhile to briefly dwell upon some influential figures in recent discussion and debate on the problem of radical scepticism, those who are deeply suspicious that any intellectually satisfactory solution could ever be given to this problem.⁴⁹ The roots of this movement in the contemporary literature can be traced back to the works of three main figures Peter Unger⁵⁰, Barry Stroud⁵¹ and Thomas Nagel⁵². In his early works⁵³ Unger argued that scepticism arises because ‘knowledge’ is an abstract term like of flat or empty. According to Unger, what is interesting about abstract terms is that they are never really satisfied, although we often talk as if they are. What the sceptic is responding to in his argument is the fact that strictly speaking nothing is ever really known, because to be *really* known the agent would have to rule out every possibility of error, and this is an impossible hurdle to clear at least for finite beings like us. So, although we speak of knowing lots of things, reflection indicates to us that our claims to knowledge are in fact, false.

Both Nagel and Stroud thought that there is something in our philosophical quest for objectivity that inexorably leads us to sceptical conclusions. Nagel argues, for instance, that objectivity involves attaining a completely impartial view of reality, one that is perspective-independent, that is, not tainted by any particular perspective. We aspire, he contends, to “get outside of ourselves”, and thereby achieve the impossible task of being able to “view the world from nowhere from within it”.⁵⁴ We realize that the initial appearances present to a viewpoint can be unreliable guides to reality and therefore seek to modify our ‘subjective’ view with a more objective perspective that is tempered by reason and reflection. As Nagel points out, however,

the trouble with this approach is as under:

...if initial appearances are not in themselves reliable guides to reality, [then] why should the products of detached reflection be any different? Why aren't they... equally doubtful...? ...The same ideas that make the pursuit of objectivity seem necessary for knowledge makes both objectivity and knowledge seem, on reflection, unattainable.⁵⁵

Stroud makes similar claims. He writes:

The skeptical philosopher's conception of our position and of his quest for an understanding of it ... is a quest for an objective or detached understanding and explanation of the position we are objectivity in. What is seen to be true from a detached 'external' standpoint might not correspond to what we take to be the truth about our position when we consider it 'internally', from within the practical context which gives our words their social point. Philosophical skepticism says the two do not correspond; we never know anything about the world around us, although we say or imply that we do hundreds of times a day... I think that the source of the philosophical problem of the external world lies somewhere within just such a conception of an objective world or in our desire, expression in terms of that conception, to gain a certain kind of understanding

of our relation to the world. But in trying to describe that conception I think I have relied on nothing... but just the general idea of what an objective world or objective world of affairs would be.⁵⁶

According to Stroud, if the general idea of objectivity does indeed express the conception of the world and relation to it that the sceptical philosophers relies on then scepticism can be avoided only if that conception is rejected. And we may note that if responding to scepticism involves denying “platitudes that we all accept”, then it follows that any adequate response to the problem of radical scepticism is bound to be intellectually unsatisfactory.

In this chapter we have made a general survey of scepticism from the ancients to the moderns, emphasizing its perennial relevance for philosophy. Needless to say, our moral ambitions also are not immune from the tentacles of scepticism. The seeds of moral scepticism are traceable in the writings of Sextus Empiricus. We have not attended to the problem of scepticism in relation to morality. This we intend to take up in the next chapter.

CHAPTER I

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. *Ibid.*
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30. David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, part 4, Sec.1.
31. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan, 1973, A769/B797, p. 613.
32. Richard H. Popkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 456-457.
33. George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, New York, 1923; reprinted, New York: Dover Publication Inc., 1955, p.308.
34. Richard H. Popkin, *op. cit.*, p.107.
35. George Santayana, *op.cit.*
36. The Fideist is one who (a) believes in God, (b) thinks everyone should believe in God, yet (c) believes that there is no objective basis for the truth of the proposition "God exists". The fideist would hold a normative belief in God, yet also be a meta-religious sceptic.
37. Richard H. Popkin, *op. cit.*, p.459.
38. Dick Garner, "Skepticism, Ordinary Language and Zen Buddhism" in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. XXVII, No. 2, 1977, p.167.
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40. Nyāya is usually taken as a non-skeptical epistemological position, but if one cares to read between the lines it would be evident that the Nyāya concerns with the definition of *vyāpti* presupposes the sceptic's doubts about the efficacy of one's awareness of *vyāpti* to validate inferences. The Nyāya thinker is a skeptic at heart inasmuch as he takes care not to allow the sceptic to get the upper hand. The Nyāya thinker may appear to refute sceptical doubts concerning *vyāpti* advanced by Jayarsi Bhaṭṭa, yet somewhere the Nyāya thinker admits sceptical logic of the sceptic as valid and shows, as in the *Vyāptipañcaka*, that no definitive definition of *vyāpti* could be available. The definitions proposed are all tentative, and are all ad hoc devices to carry on our pragmatic dealings. But theoretic considerations, if honest, shall have to admit that no satisfactory account of *vyāpti* could be given for once and for all. It is one thing to say that an awareness of *vyāpti* is necessary, but it is totally different thing to give a theoretically adequate account of it. The latter case is what the skeptic advocates, and the Nyāya thinker demonstrate this by his over-cautiousness with the notion of *vyāpti*.
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48. *Vigraha-Vyavartani*, 29, trans., K. Bhatta, Delhi: Motilal Banarasi Das, 1986, p. 61.
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CHAPTER II

EPISTEMOLOGICAL SCEPTICISM AND MORAL SCEPTICISM

In the previous chapter, we have attempted to give an outline of scepticism, its meaning and forms, and have briefly sketched the history of scepticism as an intellectual doctrine challenging the possibility of knowledge and truth. We have also stated briefly sceptical positions from the East. The whole exercise is intended as a preliminary introduction to our present purpose. While global scepticism takes all knowledge claims to fall within its scope, there is also a wide variety of specialized or thematic local scepticisms. The religious sceptic questions or denies the veracity of theological doctrines. The ethical sceptic questions or denies the tenability of moral standards. Similarly, the mathematical sceptic questions the validity of mathematical principles. The spectrum is wide. The varieties of scepticism are rarely been looked into. Our concern here is exclusively with epistemological and moral scepticism. In this chapter, we are going to state scepticism first as an epistemological position in the context of our quest for knowledge. Then, we shall take up another main tradition within scepticism that concerns morality.

I

The quest for knowledge is marked by the requirement of objectivity of knowledge and certitude of knowledge. There may be other requirements such as completeness of knowledge and its precision or exactitude. However, the search for objectivity and certainty has been regarded as the major requirement of knowledge.

To take up the first. To require objectivity of knowledge is to require knowledge of object as detached and independent of the subject. Knowledge in this sense is a mirror of external objects. The primary model of an external object is a physical object. The requirement of objectivity need not involve anything to be explained in terms of subjective experience of the knower. To attain objectivity we are to depend less and less on individual aspects of our point of view, and develop the idea of a real world interaction, which results in our beliefs about the world or our claims about it.

Another requirement of knowledge, namely, certainty, is meant for protecting the security of knowledge. This is the epistemological security. The concept of certainty has a variety of uses in philosophical writings. The word 'certain' is sometime used in the sense of 'necessary'. Some philosophers like G.E. Moore, Norman Malcolm and H.A. Prichard, although differing in some important respect from one another tend to say that 'certainty' means knowledge. It is certainty that distinguishes between knowledge and belief. Sometimes 'certainty' is also understood in the sense of the highest degree of reasonableness or credibility or maximum warrant. Roderick Chisholm¹ has offered three definitions of certainty in his books (1)

Perceiving: A Philosophical Study (2) *Theory of Knowledge* (2nd edition) and (3) *Theory of Knowledge* (3rd edition) respectively.

1. “*S* is certain that *h* is true” means:
 - (i) *S* knows that *h* is true, and
 - (ii) there is no *i* such that *i* is more worthy of *S*’s belief than *h*.
2. *p* is certain for *S* = Df *p* is beyond reasonable doubt for *S*, and there is no *q* such that believing *q* is more reasonable than believing *p*.
3. *p* is certain for *S* = Df For every *q*, believing *p* is more justified for *S* than withholding *q*, and believing *p* is at least as justified for *S* as is believing *q*.

Other senses of the concept may be listed. We are not going to decide which one or which of these uses is the most reasonable. That is not our task in this context. What we wish to point out is that there are various ways of reaching certainty. Certainty sometimes obtains through immediate experience, which is incorrigible, infallible, or directly evident. But at other times certainty comes through a proof or evidence. As a result various forms of proof or proof procedures have been developed.

The requirements of objectivity and certainty have become the targets of sceptical challenge. The more strongly these requirements are formulated, it is more likely that sceptical doubts will develop. Thus, the model of knowledge requiring objectivity and certainty invites scepticism. In other words, when these requirements are stringently demanded for a model of knowledge, and they are in fact so demanded, the rise of scepticism, negating these requirements and thus of the very model of knowledge satisfying these requirements, is not surprising.

Scepticism about knowledge has typically taken the form, namely, that what is crucial for a person's knowledge claim is whether his evidence justifies his thesis. And such justification is not forthcoming. Whatever justification is produced, is not sufficient; it can never make the knowledge claim reasonable. If it is *never* reasonable for *S* to believe *p*, then it is *not* reasonable for *S* to believe *p*, and so he does not know *p*. Even if it is reasonable to believe something on non-epistemic grounds, e.g., psychological, pragmatic, etc., it is never possible to justify someone's believing something on purely epistemic grounds, that is to say, the relevant evidence that justifies.

Justification can be defeated for different reasons. It may appear that none of our beliefs about the external world counts as knowledge, because of the fact that our evidence may support rival hypotheses equally. Suppose, I am seeing a tree. I take the sensory experience at that time to be caused by a tree. But I may have just as much reason to think that something else is the cause of the experience. Then my belief that there is a tree in front of me is arrived at arbitrarily, and does not amount to knowledge. Let us illustrate that with Alvin Goldman's hologram example.² Suppose *S* is perceiving a tree in front of him. If a laser photograph is put between the tree and the perceiver, and the photograph is illuminated by a laser beam it will look exactly like a real tree, though it is numerically different from the real one. *S* forms the belief that there is a tree in front of him. But we cannot say *S* sees a tree in front of him, for his view of the real tree is completely blocked by the interposed laser tree so that the real tree has no epistemic role in the formation of his belief. We deny that *S* sees a tree before him. Sceptical arguments can equally be urged against inference as a source of our putative knowledge about the external world. Inductive knowledge is also questioned by the sceptic. These doubts revolve round the demand for certainty

as a requirement of knowledge. If being certain means being in a position where you cannot possibly be wrong, then you can be certain only if your evidence entails the truth of what you believe on the basis of that evidence. Requiring certainty in that sense would immediately exclude the possibility of inductive knowledge whatsoever.

Thus, sceptical theories take the contents of our ordinary beliefs about the world to go beyond their grounds in ways that make it impossible to defend them against doubt. There are ways we might be wrong. That we cannot rule out. Once we notice this unclosable gap we cannot, except without conscious irrationality, maintain our confidence in those beliefs.

Let us now turn to moral scepticism. As in epistemology, in morality also, there is the basic challenge of the sceptic, the moral sceptic. Before we take up the issue of moral scepticism we want to say a few words on what is moral epistemology. Moral epistemology is simply epistemology applied to substantive moral claims and beliefs. Epistemology is a study of knowledge-claims and their justification in general. It asks whether, when, and how claims or beliefs can be justified or known or shown to be true. Moral epistemology, analogously asks whether, when and how substantive moral beliefs and claims can be justified or known or shown to be true. Knowledge, in epistemology, has been analyzed in different ways. Traditionally, knowledge is defined as justified true belief; this traditional definition has been shown as not sufficient. And various amendments of the definition has been proposed. However, regardless of how knowledge is analyzed, justification remains a distinct and important issue for epistemology. In moral epistemology, many theories study the conditions under which a moral claim or belief is justified or a person is justified in holding a moral belief. Other theories focus on processes of forming

epistemologically responsible moral beliefs. Each theory of justification incorporates subtle variations. In general, most people have moral beliefs, and they want their beliefs to be warranted or justified and not being arbitrary or unjustified. The moot question is which conditions must be met for a person to be justified in believing a substantive moral claim like “Slavery is wrong” or “Promise keeping is right”. Whereas substantive ethics is about what is morally right or wrong, good or bad, about what are the fundamental principles of morality and about whether consequences or intentions count in determining what is morally right, moral epistemology asks whether and how anyone can know or be justified in holding substantive moral beliefs. Here, various sceptical possibilities raise their heads.

Moral scepticism, like epistemological scepticism, is scepticism about moral knowledge. It challenges first order moral knowledge or cognition. It is meta-ethical or second-order study of moral beliefs, principles, norms or standards. The classical version of moral scepticism we come across in Sextus’ analysis of good. His strategy was to show that i) there is no agreement on the content of the notion of goodness; ii) in default of any such agreement, there can be no criterion for judging which of the conflicting accounts of goodness is to be preferred; and iii) if there is no criterion for judgment, then no judgment should be made.³

Moral epistemology is central to moral theory. and like epistemology proper, is marked by the quest for truth, justification and certainty. Moral scepticism undercuts any attribution of justification or warrant to moral beliefs. Since we cannot establish the truth or falsity of moral judgments by adequate evidence or reason, moral judgments are not objective. Further, moral scepticism will maintain that there are no moral truths which are accessible to us.

Moral scepticism is not a unitary view. Moral sceptics differ in many ways. In contemporary discussion, the term 'moral scepticism' carries several meanings. Marcus Singer has differentiated several senses of moral scepticism, and argues that it can mean any of the following: i) moral subjectivism, the theory that ethical judgments are reduced to statements about a person's or a society's approval, ii) emotive theory, the theory that moral judgments are expressions of feelings, iii) ethical relativism, the theory that moral standards are said to vary from place to place, or time to time, iv) egoism, the view that every one is actuated by self-interest, and v) determinism, the view that a person's actions are determined by factors beyond his control.⁴

We think that some of the above senses are really factors or components of moral scepticism. They may reinforce moral scepticism or "mutually overlap in countering the alleged claims of moral knowledge and moral objectivity", but none of these is moral scepticism itself. There is, however, a more general understanding of 'moral scepticism' proposed by J.L. Mackie. In *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*⁵ he makes a distinction between moral scepticism at the normative level and the meta-ethical level. A normative moral sceptic would argue that all established morality should be rejected. A Meta-ethical sceptic, by contrast, would argue that there is no objective basis for morality. Mackie argues further that the two are not mutually inclusive:

A man could hold strong moral views, and indeed ones whose content was thoroughly conventional, while believing that they were simply attitudes and policies with regard to conduct that he and other people held. Conversely, a man could reject all established morality

while believing it as an objective truth that it was evil or corrupt.⁶

Using Mackie's analysis as a point of reference moral scepticism is usually stated as an issue in meta-ethics: Are there independent moral facts? Is there a special ontological realm in which moral values reside? Are they amenable to knowledge? What would that knowledge be like? This cluster of questions is distinct from the normative issue, which concerns whether one holds to a conventional set of moral guidelines, such as, prohibition against lying or stealing. Mackie's views can be interpreted as contributing to both epistemological and ontological moral scepticism. We shall return to that shortly.

Several varieties of moral scepticism have been distinguished by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong⁷, two of which he considers as directly relevant for moral epistemology. These are moral justification scepticism and moral knowledge scepticism. Moral justification scepticism says that nobody is justified in believing any substantive moral claim. Moral knowledge scepticism holds that nobody ever knows that any substantive moral claim is true. He observes that since knowledge claims require justification, moral justification scepticism implies moral knowledge scepticism. However, knowledge involves more than justification. It requires truth in addition to justification, but justified belief does not. Hence, moral scepticism is also scepticism about the truth of moral claims and beliefs. There is yet another kind of moral scepticism. This is maintained, as mentioned before, by the error-theorists, like J.L. Mackie, who argue that moral claims try to say something about moral properties (such as rightness or wrongness) of actions, but there are no such properties of the kind that is claimed. Mackie's meta ethical position makes him willing to grant that

moral discourse has all the semantic features necessary to aim at truth, that it trades in genuine assertions, apt to be true or false as literally constructed, but it fails in this aim because the truth of moral statements would call for items of metaphysically outlandish sort – queer properties, which seem to promise no hope of reduction to natural, factual properties. So, all positive moral claims are false. Since, ontology is the study of what exists, the view that no moral properties exist can be called ontological moral scepticism.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has called attention to yet another view often described as moral scepticism. He calls it practical moral scepticism. There is sometimes a reason to be moral. But matters become complicated when it is claimed that there is always a reason to be moral. Practical moral scepticism denies that there is always a reason to be moral. He recognizes still another variety of moral scepticism. It is what he calls linguistic moral scepticism, based as it is on the analysis of moral language as bereft of truth-values. He has thus ultimately spoken of five kinds of moral scepticism. Let us quote him:

Linguistic moral skepticism = no moral belief or claim is true or false.

Ontological moral skepticism = no moral facts or properties exist.

Practical moral skepticism = there is not always a reason to be moral.

Moral knowledge skepticism = no moral belief or claim is known to be true.

Moral justification skepticism = no moral belief or claim is justified.⁸

It appears that the above varieties involve overlapping. Since knowledge requires both justification and truth and since in case of justification-failure there is no knowledge, we consider it proper to collapse the last two on the list, and talk of moral knowledge scepticism in general accommodating both scepticism about the truth of moral claims or beliefs and the justification of each. Again, linguistic moral scepticism has a convergence of interest with moral knowledge scepticism. But there are philosophers who would not consider linguistic moral scepticism, which is, better known as non-cognitivism, as a species of moral scepticism. Even if it is treated as such, its arguing that moral claims are neither true nor false overlaps with the concern of moral knowledge scepticism. It hardly needs to be treated as a separate brand of moral scepticism.

Besides Sinnott-Armstrong's types of moral scepticism, other varieties may be spotted. However, to keep our study tidy and manageable, we shall remain confined to the two varieties distinguished above - moral knowledge scepticism and ontological moral scepticism. We shall not venture into other kinds of scepticism unless we are constrained to do so. We may say that scepticism about moral knowledge is the central concern of moral scepticism. It takes the shape of doubts about the status of moral beliefs, about the justification of moral beliefs and about moral truth, that no substantive moral belief is true.

If scepticism about moral knowledge is the primary form of moral scepticism, ontological scepticism or scepticism about moral reality is no less important. The most direct challenge to the possibility of moral knowledge is the question whether anything exists that could possibly serve as the object of such knowledge. There can be no moral knowledge because there is no moral fact or truth to know. The error-

theoretic version of moral scepticism has given rise to widespread arguments in its favor and against. Every proponent and critic of moral scepticism should take it seriously.

Sometimes the impulse to moral scepticism comes from unexpected quarters. It is perplexing that even Kant, who affirms the rationality and objectivity of morals, betrays a hint of scepticism in his moral philosophy. According to him, though duty is the moral motive, in actual fact, we can never be sure that there are any examples of dutiful action. In other words, for Kant, we can never be sure whether for an action, which he calls a moral action, the determining motive is that of duty. In a lengthy passage of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* he categorically says:

It is in fact absolutely impossible by experience to discern with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action, however much it may conform to duty, rested solely on moral grounds and on the conception of one's duty. It sometimes happens that in the most searching self-examining we can find nothing except the moral ground of duty, which could have been powerful enough to move us to this or that good action and to much great sacrifice. But from this we cannot by any means conclude with certainty that a secret impulse of self-love falsely appearing as the idea of duty, was not actually the true determining cause of the will. For we like to flatter ourselves with a pretended noble motive, while in fact even the strictest examination can never lead us entirely behind the secret incentives, for,

when moral worth is in question, it is not a matter of action which one sees but of their inner principles which one does not see.⁹

We may now note that sometimes moral scepticism has verged on moral nihilism. The relation between the two needs to be explored. The term “nihilism” occurs first in a novel of Dostoevsky and is used by a character named Bazarov. Nihilists about morality believe that there isn’t any moral reality at all. We might speak as if there is, but in the final analysis, nothing really is morally right or wrong. These are terms that never refer. In this sense, nihilism does incorporate an element of scepticism as it is attacking the conception of moral objectivity. This is Mackie’s view in his *Ethics*. This is a broad or more general formulation of moral nihilism. However, moral nihilism is also narrowly construed as saying that nothing is morally wrong. From this it needs only a step forward to say that if nothing is morally wrong then everything is permitted. There is still another understanding of nihilism according to which it is not merely a negative moral theory but a critique of morality as well. It says, we need a critique of all moral values; the worth of these values must first be called into question to reevaluate values.

Friedrich Nietzsche is often dubbed as a nihilist. We find that in course of his doing destructive or deconstructive analysis he affirms a great deal. The revaluation of values is part of Nietzsche’s positive and negative program. To root out all of the existing valuational beliefs and practices is part of the negative project and by doing this we can begin to revalue and create values. This is part of his positive program. This is especially evident in his genealogies.¹⁰ In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche uses nihilism in a variety of senses. It means collapse of values, decline, decadence and

degeneration of values; also, the devaluation of Christian morality; values being unrealized; no longer taken seriously, without foundation; as also “revaluation of values”. To say that Nietzsche had no conception of morality, as is alleged by many thinkers, is not correct.¹¹ Nihilism is not simply a process of questioning the possibility of moral values. Its function is not overthrowing values to leave us with nothing. We are building our values in doing the critique. Nietzsche turns the table against all those who would call him a nihilist or pessimist by making the accusation first. In his work, the Christians and positivists are labeled the pessimists. The Christians negate the reality of the lived world for the sake of a conceived world. The positivists likewise distort the world as perceived into a world containing regularities which give them the illusion of control over it.

So far as the critique part of nihilism is concerned it is an ally of scepticism. In its positive strategies, nihilism is at a distance from scepticism. If moral scepticism is a challenge to cherished moral values then nihilism is both a critique and a reconstruction.

II

If we venture to trace the background of moral scepticism in contemporary philosophy we may say with some degree of certainty that both moral knowledge scepticism and ontological moral scepticism can be shown as challenges to G.E. Moore’s intuitionistic moral philosophy. The link between our task and Moore’s moral philosophy can be put in that light. Hence, we think it proper to give a sketch of Moore’s views on the matter. Moral epistemology is concerned with the possibility of moral knowledge. This concern bears on moral ontology – the kind of moral facts being there. Moore seems to believe that there is ethical knowledge. He also believes

in the 'being' of a class of objects or ideas which moral predicates like 'good' are generally used to stand for. His ethical theory involves both the cognitive character of ethics and the view that there is ethical being. Two questions arise in this connection:

- I. If there is ethical knowledge, what is it about?
- II. If there is ethical knowledge, how do we acquire it?

Moore, in effect, answers both these questions. Throughout the *Principia Ethica*¹², he speaks of ethical statements as being true or false. Ethical knowledge embodied in a true ethical statement, is knowledge of certain non-natural ethical properties or qualities. These non-natural ethical properties or qualities are simple, and can only be apprehended by intuition. Ethical knowledge is knowledge of what is good, or what the good is; it is about the value itself. "The object or idea" which the word 'good' is generally used to stand for has a peculiar ontological status. This ushers in Moore's moral ontology.

Moore speaks of the class of objects, which he says, "... do not *exist* at all". "To this class", he goes on, "... belongs what we mean by the adjective 'good' ... the most prominent members of these class are perhaps numbers ... Two *is* somehow, although it does not *exist*."¹³ "... do not *exist*", here means do not exist in time, are not a part of the natural order. Thus, Moore's ethical theory in the *Principia Ethica* involves, besides the cognitive character of ethics, the view that there is ethical being. Moore is also encouraged to posit ethical entities by his theory of truth. Moore believes that ethical propositions are about reality. He presumes that they correspond to something in reality. Hence, it is reasonable for him to assume that there are non-natural ethical qualities which have "being".

To take up the epistemological question now, that is, how do we acquire ethical knowledge? Moral judgments about what is good and right are built on the foundation of intuition. These judgments, Moore insists, are objective, and he explains that they are known by intuition. For example, the question of “... whether dispositions and actions commonly regarded ... as virtues or duties, are good in themselves; whether they have intrinsic value, must be settled by intuition alone...”¹⁴ Moore says that the word ‘intuition’ is intended to make a logical rather than a psychological point. Thus, intuition has nothing to do with any psychological process. Unlike Stevenson and Ayer and Hume before them, Moore will not provide a psychological account of ethical judgments. He says, in the preface to the *Principia Ethica* that, “...when I call such propositions (ethical propositions about what ought to exist for its own sake, what has intrinsic value, what is good in itself, etc.), ‘Intuitions’, I mean *merely* to assert that they are incapable of proof: I imply nothing whatever as to the manner or origin of our cognition of them.”¹⁵ Moore, however, says that he is not an ‘intuitionist’ in the ordinary sense of the term because, he is not interested in the causal question of the origin of our cognition of right and wrong.¹⁶ The way Moore uses ‘intuition’ shows that he excludes what we normally call sense perception or sense experience. We are left with the position that judgments of intrinsic value form a class that is incapable of proof or disproof.

Moore’s moral epistemology is characterized as a variety of intuitionism and he is, therefore, called an intuitionist, sharing this label with philosophers such as Prichard and Ross, who agree that moral intuition is the basis of moral judgments. Intuitionists say that we can know self-evident, irreducible moral truths. Moore says that, “The fundamental principles of Ethics must be self-evident.” Clarifying the

expression 'self-evident' Moore says:

The expression "self-evident" means properly that the proposition so called is evident or true, *by itself* alone; that it is not an inference from some proposition other than *itself*.¹⁷

Thus, on Moore's view, we know by intuition the ends which are good. But, of course, this does not mean that it will be self-evident in any situation what it is right to do or what we ought to do. We shall have to work that out. What courses of action are open to us? What amount of good will each bring into existence? Only when we have discovered the answers by discursive reasoning shall we be able to say where our duties lie, or what is it morally permissible to do. Moore's contemporaries Prichard and Ross are supposed to build their intuitionism on the foundation, which Moore had laid.

Another route to Moore's view that there is ethical being is his theory of meaning. Moore credits ethical propositions with meaning. Meaning for him consists in denotation. He speaks of ethical propositions as denoting or referring to something. In order for ethical terms to have meaning they have to correspond to something. Moore's theory of meaning is a "naming theory". Ethical terms name ethical realities. The word "good", in the way in which Moore uses it, is the name of a characteristic "which is simple and non-natural". The naming theory calls for ethical realities corresponding to ethical language. "My business", Moore says, "is solely with *that object or idea* which I hold rightly or wrongly that the word 'good' is generally used to *stand for*."¹⁸ Ethical concepts are assumed as having objects possessing being, and intuition is introduced as a self-evident apprehension of these objects. For example, if anything is describable as "giving aesthetic enjoyment" all rational beings as such will

see that it is also describable as “being good”, or if as “fulfilling a promise”. also as being right. We do not literally see moral objects with our eyes, but with what Moore calls non-sensuous intuition. Moore also uses words like “awareness”, “apprehension”, “acquaintance” - words with same or similar meanings. So we see that an appeal is made, as in science, to observation, but it is observation of a very special sort.

Commenting on the whole approach of Moore, R.M. Hare observes:

It was taken for granted that the way to explain the meaning of an adjective, for example, was to identify the property which it ‘stands for’ or ‘is the name of’ and adjectives have the same logical functions, that of ‘standing for’ a property, and the differences between them are not differences in logical character but simply differences between the properties for which they ‘stand’. When, therefore, it became accepted that moral adjectives did not stand for ‘natural’ “that is non-moral properties”, it was concluded that they stand for peculiar moral properties, thought to be discovered by intuition.¹⁹

We may here touch upon the views of Nicolai Hartmann, the German philosopher, who describes himself as a moral realist. Both Moore and Hartmann betray ‘common attitudes’ to a basic component of philosophy, *value*. While the key concept in Moore is ‘good’, for Hartmann it is the objective self-existence of value. Hartmann believes in the *absolutism of values*. Because for him, values have their

own kind of “reality” – the mode of being of values is like that of Platonic Ideas; values are pure essences. They do not depend on anything else for their existence; they are and remain *independent* of anything else and are self-sufficient.²⁰

There are some striking points of similarity between the views of Moore and Hartmann. For both, values are *ontologically unique* in their mode of existence. Secondly, according to both Moore and Hartmann values are not in time. They are not temporal in character – which is the criterion of natural objects. Goodness, for Moore, as a non-natural property has being and yet is not in time like natural objects. Hartmann makes values residents of the realm of Platonic Ideas. Both Moore and Hartmann argue for the objectivity of values. According to the former, value properties are objective, being on par with perceptual qualities such as yellow. Hartmann aligns values with logico-mathematical objects. Hartmann also concurs with Moore about knowing value through *a priori* intuition. E.H. Cadwallader has brought out the convergence in the thought-patterns of Moore and Hartmann as follows:

Each in his own way insists that ‘goodness’ refers to something objective, that this “real thing” is not “merely subjective” despite the fact that actual cases (instances) of goodness always (or, according to Moore, usually) involve an experiencing subject.²¹

The presence of Plato is felt in both Moore and Hartmann. However, there is a difference between Moore’s variety of Platonism and that of Hartmann’s. Cadwallader elsewhere argues that Moore is a value-*property*-Platonist and Hartmann is a value-Platonist-*proper*.²² For Moore, goodness, in the first place, is a *property*,

though, non-natural in kind. It is property *of* and *in* the natural world. As Moore writes:

...I do not deny that good is the property of certain natural objects: certain of them I think *are* good; yet I have said that 'good' itself is not a natural property.²³

Hartmann's value theory, on the other hand, is a value-Platonism-*proper* inasmuch as in his theory values are avowedly given a status of Platonic Ideas. It is moral realism and realism in the Platonic sense. The second point of difference is, there is in Moore a teleological element. According to him, by aiming at the good we cause it to exist or come into being. Our judgment depends on whether the consequences we foresee have or do not have intrinsic value. Hartmann, on the other hand, is a deontologist in respect of the status of the right action. Hartmann recognizes the intrinsic value of both the consequences as well as the means. He accepts the value of aiming at as well as the value aimed at. What we may note is that despite the above differences, both Moore and Hartmann do subscribe to a view, which may be called moral realism. Although, Moore's name figures in anti-realistic and anti-objectivist theories in ethics, Hartmann's views do not occur in such discussions. And we feel that the issue of value realism in Hartmann could have received the same attention in sceptical theories of value.

What has been stated above should not be treated as useless digression. We have wanted to highlight the background of the emergence of moral scepticism in recent times, both in its epistemological and ontological meanings. Many of the moral sceptical theories have come as reaction against Moore's moral theories – his optimistic moral epistemology and ontology. Moore's thesis in *Principia Ethica*

clearly sides with that of the moral cognitivists and moral realists at a time when the debate over them has scarcely started. This book has also been influential in triggering off sceptical reactions against the doctrines regarding what might be called the moral ontology and moral epistemology in ethics. For, moral scepticism is against not only moral cognitivism but also moral realism.

Moore's moral epistemology has been criticized by an impressive group of philosophers of diverse persuasions such as Ayer, Stevenson, Hare, Gibbard and Blackburn, among others. This attests to the significant influence it has had since Moore first articulated his position in 1903. Further, it creates a burden of proof on the ethical naturalist. According to whom the meaning of ethical terms can be reduced to properties and characteristics of natural objects without remainder. The question of the identity of moral properties with natural properties remains a hotly contested issue. Moore's reasons for rejecting the identity may not be good reasons, but he succeeded in focusing the debate on the strictly ontological issue of identity; he was still right to draw our attention to the apparent difference between a property that describes a natural feature of the world, and a property that has prescriptive or normative significance for us. The latter tells us how things ought to be rather than telling us how things are. How could properties that play such different roles in our reflection about the world be the same? This has aroused a myriad of reactions about the putative identity both in Moore's target group – the naturalists and the non-cognitivists non-naturalists. The arguments and counter-arguments have either fed moral scepticism or thawed it. According to Russ Shaffer-Landau, Moore's *Principia Ethica* set the course for much of twentieth-century metaethics, and represents, an

important basis for scepticism in ethics.²⁴ Further on, he says:

Moore's arguments have been put to powerful use by Moore's non-cognitivist opponents, who share his rejection of ethical naturalism but find grave problems (namely, the ontological, epistemological, motivational, and moral rationalist worries...) for Moore's own view.²⁵

Hence, we submit that re-counting Moore's moral views is not without purpose.

III

In Section I, we have outlined epistemological scepticism and its essential features as a preface to our discussion of moral scepticism. We have done that because epistemological scepticism is the most dominant form of scepticism. We have also discussed moral scepticism in its epistemological and ontological aspects. In that connection we have sketched in the preceding Section Moore's moral theory as giving rise to sceptical doubts in moral philosophy. In this section, we attempt to be clear about one thing – we want to specify the relationship between epistemological scepticism and moral scepticism. We have sketched moral scepticism as a variety of epistemological scepticism. In this connection, S.A. Shaida says:

... there are indeed 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.²⁶

Indeed, a number of similar methodological and semantical questions are raised in each. Thus, a non-solipsistic universe, in my opinion, is common to both. One cannot raise questions of knowing something unless he starts with the assumption that there is something to know. Similarly, morality presupposes that there are other human beings, besides the agent, who are affected by his actions making possible the moral rightness or wrongness of his actions. Both ethics and epistemology are normative in character. Hence, moral knowledge scepticism and epistemological scepticism proper relate to questions of evaluation. Yet, the problems and issues of moral scepticism, to our mind, are more complex than those of epistemological scepticism. The factors of freedom and decision, namely, what moral stand to take, what sort of life one ought to live, what things one ought to value and the irresolvable cultural divergences regarding norms, values and obligations, which are not so much related to questions of logic and facts, have but added a peculiar dimension to moral scepticism. Scepticism about moral arguments is often associated with emotions, sentiments and attitudes. Analogous comments could hardly be made about scepticism regarding the external world. For these reasons, a straightforward equation of moral scepticism and epistemological scepticism is difficult to sustain. Though in the majority of cases epistemological scepticism leads to moral scepticism, exceptions are not wanting. Hume, who is an avowed sceptic in his theory of knowledge, is not a sceptic in his moral philosophy. As Shaida says:

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.²⁷

The moral sceptics might go on to be sceptics about the external world or about other minds or about induction or about our other beliefs, but these other scepticisms are not entailed by moral scepticism alone. Moral scepticism exclusively is not the springwell of other kinds of scepticism.

That moral scepticism is not analogous to scepticism about the external world has been argued out by David Copp. In trying to articulate the thesis of moral scepticism Copp says that moral scepticism is not exclusively epistemological. He concedes that “there are ... ‘epistemic theories’ of moral justification, which assimilate the justification of a moral code or standard or principle to epistemic justification of some sort.” He points out that “there are ‘practical theories’ of moral justification which do not.”²⁸ What, then, is the distinction between epistemic and practical theories? Epistemic theories would justify a moral code showing in a straightforward way the evidence of its truth or reasons for supposing it true. Practical theories, as Copp understands them, claim to justify a moral code by showing the rationality of selecting it to serve a specified purpose, or by showing that rational choice essentially requires choosing as it prescribes, or in some other way that essentially involves a conception of practical reason.²⁹

To clarify our point let us give an account of David Hume as an epistemological sceptic and then pass on to his moral theory. To begin with Hume's epistemological scepticism. In a pamphlet³⁰ written by David Hume in favor of the *Treatise*, Hume describes his philosophy as "very skeptical". He also says that the work insists, "upon several other skeptical topics, and upon the whole concludes, that we ascent to our faculties and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy would render us entirely *Pyrrhonian*, were not nature too strong for it". He argued that we have no reason to believe any 'external' matters of fact, that is, any claim about what is distinct from our present experience. At one point, he says:

The only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions, which ... are the first foundations of all our conclusions. The only conclusions we can draw from the existence of one thing to that of another, is by means of the relation of the cause and effect ... But as no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions, it follows that we may observe a conjunction or a relation of cause and effect between different perceptions and objects. 'Tis impossible, therefore, that from the existence of any of the qualities of the former, we can ever form any conclusion concerning the existence of the latter, or ever satisfy our reasons in this particular.³¹

The preceding quotation indicates that Hume held that it is not unreasonable for us to think that any claim asserting the existence of an external object is not reasonable. Hume is also 'skeptical with regard to reason'.³² Hume's scepticism

cannot be a result of Hume's empiricism. But it is primarily his theory of belief that pushes his philosophy in the direction of scepticism. Let us elaborate this point.

We may start with our belief in the existence of the external world. As human beings we naturally suppose that we are directly aware of a world that is independent of us, and continues to exist when we are not aware of it. What is the source of this belief? Hume explicitly says that this belief cannot be the result of sound argument. Great majority of human beings have this belief. But they do so in a total absence of justifying arguments. In his words:

And indeed, whatever convincing arguments philosophers may fancy they can produce to establish the belief of objects independent of the mind, 'tis obvious these arguments are known but to very few, and that 'tis not by them, that children, peasants, and the greatest part of mankind are induced to attribute objects to some impressions, and deny them to others.³³

Thus, for Hume, the common belief in an external world is not based on any sort of reasoning to begin with, and cannot be supported by sound reasoning about the fact. This is one side of Hume's scepticism.

Another side of Hume's scepticism emerges when he lays bare what he takes to be the mechanisms, that do, in fact, govern the formation of beliefs in that matter. *The Abstract*, mentioned earlier, describes a belief as nothing but a peculiar sentiment produced by habit. Clearly, Hume is against the rationalist or Cartesian conception of belief formation, that belief is the result of reasoning, and sound beliefs are the results of sound reasoning. Against this conception of belief formation Hume holds that

reasoning, by itself, is generally incapable of fixing belief, and, in this particular case, incapable of establishing a belief in the existence of an external world.

These sceptical motives are further developed when Hume presents a causal account of the actual mechanisms that lead us to believe that we are aware of an independent external world. The formation of our beliefs on such an arbitrary basis generates further scepticism. In the *Enquiry* Hume describes scepticism generated in this way as follows:

There is another species of skepticism, consequent to science and enquiry, when men are supposed to have discovered, either the absolute fallaciousness of their mental faculties, or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about which they are commonly employed. Even our very senses are brought into dispute, by a certain species of philosophers, and the maxims of common life are subjected to the same doubt as the most profound principles or conclusions of metaphysics and theology.³⁴

Such views of Hume led Hume scholars to distinguish two sceptical strategies in his writings. Robert J. Fogelin maintains such a view. According to him, “The first, we might call the argumentative strategy; the second, is the genetic strategy”.³⁵ In the first, according to Fogelin, Hume adopts the common skeptical move that some class of beliefs is not capable of rational justification. This class of beliefs includes, most importantly, his skepticism concerning induction, his skepticism concerning the

external world³⁶, and his skepticism with regard to reason. The second, shows us that when empirical investigation lays bare the actual mechanisms that lead us to embrace belief in the external world, we are immediately struck by their inadequacy.³⁷

We have just mentioned Hume's scepticism concerning induction as one of the most important features of Hume's philosophy. But the explanation of it is now to be made. The limitations of our present purpose preclude a close examination of his important ideas on necessity and causality. We shall content ourselves to remain confined to the notion of induction. Here the general and fundamental question that Hume raises is: How can we ever be justified in making factual inferences that carry us beyond the evidence of our past and present observation? In raising this question, he posed what has come to be known to philosophers as the *Problem of Induction*. Hume's basic arguments for inductive scepticism are stated in the *Treatise*, in *The Abstract* and in the *Enquiry*. However, it gets its most elaborate discussion in the *Enquiry*. Though, there are important differences in detail, in the three texts, the basic move is the same in each. Our reliance on past experience rests, he tells us, "on the principle that those instances, of which we have had no experience, resemble those, of which we have had experience"³⁸ and, with respect to the future this amounts to the assumptions, that there will not be a change in the nature, "that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same".³⁹

On what basis, Hume asks, can we justify this assumption? His claim is that it cannot be justified by demonstrative reasoning, nor can it be justified by probability. In the *Abstract* he tells us that it's not possible to "prove by any *probable* arguments, that the future must be conformable to the past. All probable arguments are built on the supposition that there is this conformity between the future and the past, and

therefore, can never prove it".⁴⁰ The arguments in the *Enquiry* has the same underlying structure as those in the *Treatise*, but it employs an essentially new argumentative device: the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact.

The statement expressing relations of ideas , for example, "5 times 3 makes 15," can be known to be *a priori*. In contrast, matters of fact are not ascertained by the mere operations of thought. Second, "Contrary of every matter of fact is possible..." This distinction has the consequence that no proposition that is not a relation of ideas can be known to be true *a priori*. He claims, "that all our reasoning concerning matters of fact derive from nothing but custom: and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive than of the cognitive part of our nature".⁴¹

The target of Hume's scepticism is not simply human reasoning – demonstrative and intuitive knowledge. Before trusting reason we must ask how reliable it is. In a section of the *Treatise*, he allows scepticism to invade the domain of reason, using the arguments that the admitted possibility of our making mistakes in the demonstrative sciences entails that even in their case knowledge degenerates into probability. Since the judgment of probability itself is not certain, the doubts successively mount up until even the probability is all taken away. The upshot of this, Hume tells us, is that "all Knowledge degenerates into probability..."⁴²

Hume did not recommend a wholesale suspension of belief. Yet his criticism of human faculties of understanding, reason and sense degenerates knowledge into probability. He is denying any logical connection between the truth of any belief and how we arrive at it. In so far as he presents us with a thorough going critique of our intellectual faculties, he is a radical, unreserved, unmitigated sceptic. As A.J. Ayer says, "... he has developed the skeptic's case to its greatest extent ..."⁴³

In his moral philosophy, Hume shows himself as an empiricist and not as a sceptic. In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (*EM*), Hume rejects, out of hand, “disingenuous disputants”, who deny “the reality of moral distinctions”.⁴⁴ For Hume, the moral distinctions remain in fact. They are not made by reason, but nature endows us with this distinction. When Hume claims himself to be a moral sceptic he does so not in the sense that he is against morality. That is to say, he does not question the possibility of moral knowledge, although he denies that moral judgments are descriptions of matters of fact. His scepticism is directed against ethical rationalism, which says that moral distinctions are derived from reason. In the *Treatise* he comes down heavily against the ethical rationalist. The first chapter of the *Treatise* opens with the heading, “Moral Distinctions Are Not Derived From Reason”.

Hume’s moral theory presupposes a set of moral standards which are universal for all human beings. Let us consider Hume’s stress upon the role of reason in moral action. When he asks what, in the last analysis, is the basis upon which we attribute goodness or badness to people, or rightness or wrongness to actions, his answer is always “what this final sentence depends on is some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species.”⁴⁵ The value which we attribute to things is not something personal - a result of arbitrary decision. Rather it lies in the natural organism itself. For example, speaking of the love of a parent for its helpless offspring, Hume writes that “passion alone, arising from the original structure and formation of human nature, bestows a value on the most significant objective.” Hume stresses the origin of the fundamental structures of both belief and action in *human nature*. That Hume conceives of both experimental inference and moral evaluation as having their origin in human nature should not disguise the fact that the former can overcome its parentage, while the latter cannot. The moral sentiment, which we feel in

approving of some actions and disapproving of others, lies only in the eye, or rather, the mind, of the perceiver. Virtue is “whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation, and vice the contrary.”⁴⁶ He rejects the views of those who deny the reality of moral distinctions. He does not question the possibility of moral knowledge, although he denies that moral judgments are descriptions of matters of fact.

On the reverse side, a moral sceptic may not necessarily be an epistemological sceptic. He need not necessarily uphold a sceptical posture in epistemology. One may question the objectivity of moral judgments without committing himself to scepticism about the knowledge of the external world. To our mind, an instance of this is Bertrand Russell.

Russell remains famous as a logician, a metaphysician, a philosopher of mathematics and a philosopher of language, but his contributions to ethical theory verge on scepticism. His paper “Is There an Absolute Good?” which anticipates J.L. Mackie’s “The Refutations of Morals” [1946] by over twenty years, was presented before a Cambridge discussion group in 1922, and was not published before 1988. In that paper, Russell rejects the objectivity of ethical judgments as false because there is no property of goodness corresponding to the predicate “good”. One of Russell’s arguments for rejecting a non-natural property of goodness subsequently popularized by Mackie as the “argument from relativity”, starts with diversity of moral opinions and the supposed impossibility of proof when it comes to ultimate values. “If our views as to what ought to be done were to be truly rational, we ought to have a rational way of ascertaining what things are such as ought to exist on their own account [that is, what things are good]... On [this] point no argument is possible.

There can be nothing beyond an appeal to individual tests.”⁴⁷ Russell goes on to say, “The art of presenting one’s desires persuasively is totally different from that of logical demonstration, but it is equally legitimate.”⁴⁸

Another pro-sceptic moral theory, emotivism, was Russell’s dominant view from 1913 onwards. His version of emotivism which appeared in his popular book, *Religion and Science* (originally published in 1935), anticipates Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) by one year and Stevenson’s “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms” (1937) by two years. He was an emotivist because he could not “see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values.”⁴⁹

We may state that George Santayana, Otto Neurath and J.L. Mackie were all commonsense realists, while firmly rejecting *moral* realism with their non-cognitivist or error-theorist conception of the logical status of values. Moore was both a commonsense realist and a critique of idealism and he was also a moral realist. But, there is no logical relationship between his commonsense realism and moral realism. In ethics, Moore develops his position, that is, moral cognitivism and moral realism, in opposition to ethical naturalism. In epistemology, his enemy was idealism.

Moral scepticism has been approached in two ways. The moral sceptic is not merely one who denies that we know moral values but is also one who denies that there are any moral values to know. The former has as its adversary moral cognitivism and the latter is directed against moral realism. According to moral cognitivism, moral judgments are cognitive. They convey moral knowledge. Moral judgments not only have fact-stating and property-ascribing form, they have cognitive content as well. Moral realism holds that there are objective values of both moral and non-moral kinds independent of our perspectives or view points. The dominant

question in the former may be framed as: Is moral knowledge possible? Or, are moral knowledge claims justifiable? In the latter the chief problem is: Are there moral facts and truths, which are independent of one's belief of what is right and wrong? It is convenient to make this distinction. However, the distinction should not be stressed too far. For epistemological arguments are used to support ontological claims (both positive and negative). When Mackie criticizes the position that there are moral facts, he argues that the moral objectivist is ultimately committed to an implausible intuitionist epistemology. The moral sceptic challenges both moral cognitivism and moral realism.

It should be no surprise that scepticism about morality has been thought analogous to scepticism about the external world. After all, the other familiar forms of scepticism that are studied in philosophy are standardly taken to be epistemological in nature. They are taken to consist in the denial or doubt that we have knowledge of the truth of some proposition, such as the proposition that there is an external world or that there are other minds or that there is a God. So it would be natural to interpret the moral sceptic as denying that we have any knowledge of moral truths. However, although her position does indeed *entail* that there is no moral knowledge, it is stronger than simply the denial of moral knowledge. It is a denial of the objectivity of moral truths or properties.

In concluding our discussion, we may recapitulate what we have tried to say. We have outlined epistemological scepticism or scepticism proper. We have tried to elucidate moral scepticism as a variety of epistemological scepticism, as a theory raising doubts about moral knowledge or justified moral belief and also questioning the existence of objective moral values. We have also tried to show that the two

sceptical doctrines – epistemological and moral are not necessarily related.

Subscribing to one does not entail subscribing to the other.

CHAPTER II

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CHAPTER III

FOUNDATIONS OF MORAL SCEPTICISM

Sceptical possibilities that our beliefs are unwarranted may arise due to a number of reasons. Since sceptical challenges are disturbing to the mind let us have a look at the arguments that give rise to the sceptical worries. We have stated before, in Chapter II, that moral scepticism is directed against moral ontology and moral epistemology. Hence, moral scepticism takes two forms – epistemological and ontological. They are distinguishable, but not separable. Generally, the grounds which justify epistemological scepticism are, generally, adduced to maintain ontological scepticism. The grounds or the arguments, which are put forth by the moral sceptic, are designed to dismiss both the claims to moral cognitivism and moral realism.

Moral disagreement plays a crucial role in an argument against the objectivity of morality. Identification of the conception of moral objectivity involves the familiar idea that a person knows a moral proposition, if it is true, the person believes it and is justified in believing it. Truth in this formulation is taken to be wholly or mostly similar to the straightforward sense of truth in ordinary statements such as “It was true that the sun set at 6 P.M. yesterday.” Justification is understood to require that the person has adequate evidence or reasons for believing that the proposition is true in this sense. Morality may be said to be objective only if moral propositions are typically true or false; many of them are true; and persons have the ability to be and frequently are, justified in believing them. Moral objectivists contend that morality is objective in this sense.

It is this conception of moral objectivity that a proponent of the disagreement argument, that is, the sceptic typically aims to challenge. The sceptic understands the moral objectivity as committing to thinking that there is some relationship between justification and agreement. A suitably formed agreement creates a presumption for justification. Agreement of well-informed and reasonable persons in relevant respects is an indicator of their being justified in believing a class of propositions, and is as such the indicator of objectivity.

The sceptics hold that there are widespread and deep, sometimes intractable, inter-personal and inter-cultural moral disagreements that appear as persistently resistant to rational resolution. In such disagreements, it appears that each side has reasons for its own position, and does not accept the reasons on the other side. The disagreement is not the result that one side is less informed or reasonable than the other. In view of this, it is implausible to maintain, the sceptic would say, that the agreement indicator of the objectivity obtains for moral propositions. The claim is that the evidence of the existence of disagreement calls into question the agreement indicator, and is best accounted for on the assumption that there are no objective truths that moral judgments might capture. Often an explanation of why this agreement does not obtain comes from noticing a contrast between scientific enquiry, on the one hand and moral enquiry, on the other.

Scientific enquiry broadly construed, has generated a great deal of consensus within its own communities – consensus on substantive truths within scientific disciplines, as well as consensus on what constitutes appropriate method for confirming such truths. By contrast, there is much disagreement about how to make progress in ethical investigations and about substantive ethical issues¹¹. This argument

from disagreement has been given by Simon Blackburn¹², J.L. Mackie¹³, R.M. Hare¹⁴, C.L. Stevenson¹⁵ and B. Williams¹⁶, and others. Although the phenomenon of moral disagreement is an inalienable part of moral relativism, we intend to discuss it separately, as an independent argument because some moral philosophers such as B. Williams⁷, Gilbert Harman⁸, Judith J. Thompson⁹, Nicholas Sturgeon¹⁰, etc. have paid special attention to the problem of disagreement in ethics vis a vis disagreement in science.

It has been observed that the fundamental difference between the scientific and the ethical is that while in a scientific enquiry, there is a convergence on an answer to how things are, in the sphere of the ethical there is no such convergence. Science gives us an absolute conception of the world in which all the perspectival conceptions of it converge. Convergence in ethics is not forthcoming. One might hope that convergence in ethical outlook will take place. Even if this happens it will not be proper to think that this convergence has been guided by *how things actually are*. There are those who accept the plausibility of realism when it comes to geology or physics or molecular biology, but who take a decidedly sceptical attitude towards moral claims. Scientists agree regarding the structure of the atom. Their agreement is guided, among other things, by the way an atom is seen under a powerful instrument. The structure of atom is known by heating light and analyzing the effect through a spectrometer. Theoretical modeling and experimental observation through spectrometer run parallel. This accounts for the convergence of observations regarding the structure of an atom. People, on the other hand, will hardly agree in their judgments about value. A man, without being inconsistent, can provide reasons to lead an ethical life that he does, and the reasons he offers, may come in conflict with those by which others seek to live ethically. This shows that ethical judgments

are not grounded in objective reality. In contrast, the subject matters of science are construed realistically. There, stance-independent conception of reality, serves as an extremely useful constraint on investigation. We have some way of determining when theories fail to match up with the reality they are intended to describe. If there were moral facts, then we would have to charge, at least, one party to a moral dispute with having made some cognitive error. What, however, characterizes moral disagreement is that even on the most charitable and plausible account of the matter no one need be mistaken. The extent of disagreement in ethics is best explained by the absence of any objective reality that could be captured by our moral judgments.

This basic contrast between ‘the scientific’ and ‘the ethical’ in terms of convergence has been expressed very neatly by Bernard Williams. In his words:

In a scientific enquiry there should ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are: in the area of the ethical, at least at a high level of generality, there is no such coherent hope. The distinction does not turn on any difference in whether convergence will actually occur ... It might turn out that there will be convergence in ethical outlook at least among human beings. The point of the contrast is that, even if that convergence in ethical outlook happens, it will not be correct to think that it has come about because convergence has been guided by how things actually are, whereas convergence in the sciences might be explained in that way if it does

happen. This means, among other things, that we understand differently in the two cases the existence of convergence or, alternatively its failure to come about.¹¹

Gilbert Harman has made a similar point about denying the existence of moral facts in his discussion of the difference between observation in science and that in ethics. Harman does not explicitly refer to the problem of moral disagreement, but his views have a direct bearing upon it. Because it shows up a way of the irresolution of the problem. In the opening chapter of *The Nature of Morality*, he argues that ethics is problematic because it appears that “there can be no explanatory chain between moral principles and particular observing in the way that there can be such a chain between scientific principles and particular observings.”¹² The contrast between the role of observation in science and that in ethics may be explained by considering how a scientific hypothesis is confirmed. A step in confirmation is testing the hypothesis in real experiments out in the world. For example, the effect of altitude on the mercury column in a barometer may be tested by varying the circumstances; by observing how the mercury behaves on mountains, in the planes and at the sea level and taking note of the results. In the moral observation, namely, it is wrong to inflict unnecessary pain on a child, what we need are not moral facts but certain moral propositions based on our moral sensitivity. There are no objective moral facts which ground a man’s beliefs about the values and purposes that should direct his conduct.

According to Harman:

... observation plays a role in science that it does not seem to play in ethics. The difference is that you need to make assumptions about certain physical facts to

explain the occurrence of the observations that support a scientific theory, but you do not seem to need to make assumptions about any moral fact to explain the occurrence of the so-called moral observations. In the moral case, it would seem that you need only make assumptions about the psychology or moral sensibility of the person making the moral observation. In the scientific case, theory is tested against the world.¹³

He also says:

... there are no pure observations. Observations are always 'theory laden'. What you perceive depends to some extent on the theory you hold consciously or unconsciously.¹⁴

For example, suppose that you see something burning. "In one sense, what you see", according to Harman, "... is a pattern of light on your retina, a shifting array of splotches, though even that is theory, and you could never adequately describe what you see in that sense. In another sense, you see what you do because of the theories you hold. Change these theories and you would see something different, given the same pattern of light."¹⁵ To say that you observe some event or object presupposes a theory within which the concept of that event or object occurs. To say that we observe gasoline burning requires a theory within which such concepts as gasoline and burning occur, and within which there are criteria for correctness of observational claims.

Sometimes our observations are consistent with the theory, within which they occur, and sometimes they are not. When the observations are not consistent with theory, we have at least two options. Either we can say that one or more of the observations were mistaken, or we say that the theory was, in some ways, mistaken. In the case of the natural sciences, the theory that makes the greatest sense out of these possibilities is a theory that postulates the existence of physical facts. Observations in the natural sciences, Harman says, "... need to make assumptions about certain physical facts to explain the occurrence of the observations that support a scientific theory".¹⁶ That is to say, within the natural sciences, observations that conform or are inconsistent with the natural sciences presuppose the existence of physical facts. The theory that best accounts for our observations and the ways that our observations can affect our behaviors is a theory that postulates the existence of physical facts.¹⁷ This means that our observations, when accurate, are about these physical facts.

Let us now turn to the case of ethical claims. Harman writes that the story about the role of observation in ethics suggests that it is different from that in the natural sciences. Whereas the theories in the natural sciences that make the greatest sense out of our observations are ones that postulate the existence of physical facts, there is no analogous imperative for theories in ethics. Harman puts the point quite clearly that in ethics observations do not require postulating the existence of moral facts; do not seem to be the evidence of moral facts. Harman's approach to ethical observation renders difficult the resolution of moral disagreement. Our contrasting or conflicting moral observations or evaluations cannot be tested against "moral facts", but are "only evidence of you and your moral sensibility."¹⁸ And moral sensibility relates to facts about psychology or biology, and is subject to training and education.

The most important sceptical argument comes from relativism. Of the grounds of scepticism, moral relativism stands out prominently as one of the most congenial. The different moral sceptical theses that we are never justified in accepting or rejecting moral judgments; that moral judgments lack truth-value, or the error-theoretic view that moral judgments are always false – have their locus in moral relativism. Relativism has been extremely influential in contemporary culture. Whether we try to understand real things or events or the findings of science or historical epochs, or contemporary social, moral, political phenomena, or different cultures or institutions, or human nature and action, or sacred and literary texts, we hear voices telling us that there are no hard facts of the matter, unconditioned by our own various ways of understanding, pertaining to any of these.

Relativism is no accident. Relativism in ethics and elsewhere can be shown to have a history. Recently, it has received an impetus in contemporary intellectual scenario. With the development of the theory of deconstruction in the West, the totality of reason and its evident domination has been dislodged through a cultivation of liberating of emancipatory forms. With a critical relativization of rationality there is a network of contingencies. There is no place for an absolute and central form for assessment; rather there are different formulations, different creations, different modifications and different perspectives. This development has deepened man's reliance on relativism including moral relativism.

Argument from the relativity of morals has been a very strong argument to establish moral scepticism. Relativism about values arises as a reaction against, and as a consequent denial of moral absolutism. Moral absolutism claims that there are absolute moral truths to hit upon, truths which are adhered to by all men across space

and time. This position is in direct opposition to that of the moral relativist, which reasserts the ancient Protagorean dictum – “Man is the measure of all things” (*Homo Mensura*). Moral absolutism is, we know, embedded in the rationalistic ethics of Kant. Kant treated ethical consideration as basic in his theory of Practical Reason, and regarded the categorical imperative as grounding absolute moral obligations. Rationality of morality goes with the *a priori* nature of moral truths. Besides, objectivity of moral judgments are supposed to be ensured by moral absolutes. Religion and theology have also strengthened moral absolutism. Divine commands or divine goodness speaks of eternal and absolute values and virtues, which could survive vicissitudes of time. God is seen as the repository of moral goodness and perfection. Moral relativity amounts not only to the denial of absolute moral values but also that of moral objectivity.

Moral absolutism is challenged by drawing our attention to the well known variations in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another and also the differences in moral beliefs between groups and classes within a community. People judge that some things are good or right and others are bad or wrong because they arouse certain responses in them, though the same things would arouse radically and irresolvably different responses in others. For example, customs and conventions regarding marriage and divorce, treatment of women and the old people, birth and burial (cremation) vary from culture to culture. Consequently, moral judgments regarding these states of affairs also vary. Again, there are sharp differences concerning the morality of war, scarcely any uniformity of moral opinion about sex, aggressive behavior or corruption. In view of this relativism comes to be treated as an ally of scepticism, if not identical with it. Moral relativism, according to many moral philosophers, is not a kind of moral scepticism although it is one of the

factors that contribute to moral scepticism. Defenders of moral relativism include J.L. Mackie, Max Sterner, Richard Joyce, Michel Rose, Richard Garner, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and others. Harman argues in favor of a kind of moral relativism which is not moral scepticism. However, he has influenced some contemporary moral sceptics.

Relativism has taken different forms. Moral relativism is often distinguished as general and specific. General relativism is the view that moral values, obligations, norms, etc., are relative to general human situations, needs and desires. They find their expression in the social, cultural, historical and economic conditions. Yet, they are objectively appropriate and relevant in relation to age or society. Naturally, to judge correctly the moral ideas we have to take into account the societies and cultures to which they belong. In this sense laws, norms or conventions are not always absolute, though general and universal. When Protagoras declares his dictum, "Man is the measure of all things", it is understood in the sense of 'species man' or human beings at large. It does not commit anyone to the form of relativism which leads to scepticism. The Protagorean maxim was upheld by philosophers like Aristotle, Shaftsbury, Hutcheson and Hume in different ways. Aristotle holds the good man to be the measure of what is pleasant or agreeable and painful or disagreeable. For Hume, the role of a benevolent impartial spectator is to present to our consideration an objective appraisal of what is good or bad, right or wrong.

In the 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 to feel.¹⁹

The convention of the impartial spectator comes close to the notion of the ideal observer and both these concepts are surely not a far cry from Protagoras' statement.

The specific theory of relativity in morality is that moral values are dependent on the individual's unique and specific situations and motivational set. It denies a single true morality that applies to all agents. When people have come to hold the same view on moral matters, namely, values and obligations, it is merely incidental. Such agreement is neither necessary nor common. This variety of relativism may be called 'moral individualism'. It is so called because moral judgments are assimilated to personal taste, preference and attitudes. Even when everyone have the same beliefs, each of them maintains individual preferences, desires and aspirations. David Wong has attributed Stevenson's analysis of moral judgments to this kind of relativism.²⁰ Besides the two varieties of relativism, general and specific, two other varieties of moral relativism have been distinguished. These are descriptive moral relativism and meta-ethical moral relativism.

Descriptive moral relativism came to the focus with the spate of researches in anthropology and sociology. We have especially in mind Edward Westermarck²¹ and Richard Brandt²². Their researches show that there is fundamental disagreement about the right codes of action even when the same consequences seem likely to arise. As a matter of empirical fact, opposing moral beliefs can both be held true simultaneously showing that the *basic* beliefs of different people and societies are different and even conflicting. Widespread moral disagreements are much more significant than whatever agreement there may be.

Meta-ethical moral relativism came to the fore with the rise of analysis of moral language roughly from the third decade of the last Century raising questions about the cognitivity of moral statements, their objectivity and justification. Majority of the meta-ethical relativists, in general, believe that the descriptive properties of terms such as ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’; etc., do not stand subject to universal truth conditions, but only to societal convention and personal preference. Given the same set of variable facts, some societies or individuals will have a fundamental disagreement about what one *ought* to do based on societal or individual *norms*, and one cannot adjudicate these using some independent standard of evaluation. The standard of evaluation will always be societal or personal and not universal, unlike, for example, the scientific standards for assessing temperature, or for determining mathematical truths. Thus, meta-ethical moral relativism is the view that in the case of basic ethical judgments, there is no objectively valid, rational way of justifying one against the other; consequently, two conflicting basic judgments may be equally valid. Meta-ethical moral relativism is, in part, a negative thesis that challenges the claims of moral objectivists. Moral judgments lack the moral authority or force that the moral objectivists usually confer upon these judgments. Whatever justification or truth moral judgments have is but relative to some group or person, not absolutely or universally. Among the contemporary philosophers, who defend forms of it, the most prominent are Gilbert Harman²³ and David B. Wong²⁴. J.L. Mackie²⁵ has also taken recourse to the argument from relativity to refute the claim that there is a special ontological realm in which moral values reside. Though R.M. Hare²⁶ is a prominent meta-ethicist and it is also true that his views are compatible with relativism, yet his analysis of second-order normative language as a species of prescriptive language is used to talk about the logical implications of it that may apply to all moral agents,

past, present and future, unlike ordinary imperatives. However, his emphasis on the element of choice or decision on principles makes him subscribe to what is called principled moral individualism.

Besides these two sorts of relativism, we find another sort of relativism, normative relativism, distinguished by William K. Frankena. It is the view that “what is right or good for one individual or society is not right or good for another, even if the situations are the same.”²⁷ The problem is whether normative relativism is really a normative ethical theory at all. It neither states nor implies anything about what makes right acts right, what state of affairs are morally valuable, what the virtues are or any other such thing that may figure in a statement *about* normative ethics. It identifies, in effect, a consequence of the view that there is no universally valid moral theory, no one true morality. In fact, as defined by Frankena, “normative relativism” is virtually indistinguishable from the consequence of meta-ethical relativism; namely, conflicting basic normative judgments may be equally valid. That being so, normative relativism is a theory of meta-ethics, a theory whose subject matter is normative moral judgments, with no implication as to what is normatively right or wrong.

From still another angle, moral relativism may be social or individual. According to social relativism morality is relative to society; it varies from society to society. A different sort of moral relativism holds that morality is relative not to the society but to the individual. It is the theory that what is right and wrong is determined by what a person thinks is right and wrong. However, it, i.e., individual relativism, is not very plausible. It collapses the distinction between thinking something as right and its actually being right. We have all, in one time or another in our life, done things we thought were right at the time, but later decided that we were

wrong. Our normal view is that we were mistaken in our original thinking; we believed the action to have been right, but it was not. On the relativist view, one would have to say that the action in question was originally right but later wrong as our thinking changed. This is a confusing thing to say. The theory that morality is relative to society, however, is more plausible. Let us concentrate on that.

Contrary to individual moral relativism, social relativism analyses moral statements as founded on agreements of the *group* to act in certain ways. Moral truth becomes relative to the group, instead of to individuals. Gilbert Harman is a proponent of this theory. His analysis of morality is premised on the theory that morality is constituted by an implicit agreement among members of a society, each intending to comply as long as the others comply. When speakers make ought statements, for e.g., “A ought to do X”, they are presuming an agreement along with A and their audiences. The agreement concerns holding that being a party to an agreement X is the best course of action for A. Harman’s analysis implies that it is possible to make distinction between good and bad arguments for moral positions – X being the course of action for A that is supported by the best reasons. It has been argued that Harman allows for a greater measure of moral objectivity than is allowed by moral individualism. Yet, it allows for relativity at the same time. Once we allow that different groups can have different agreements, relativism follows. Harman argues that his theory of morality as implicit agreement can explain why it is odd to say “Hitler morally ought not to have ordered the killings of Jews.” The explanation, says Harman, is that we cannot conceive of Hitler as a party to any implicit agreement to which we could be parties. No question of conflict arises because moral statements conflict only when they constitute conflicting recommendations based on the same implicit agreement.²⁸

The divisions of moral relativism into different categories is not fully water-tight. There may be overlapping among the categories distinguished. For example, specific moral relativism and individual moral relativism actually coincide, both having the individual at the centre. Moral relativism as cultural, social or that of the group refers to the single theme with variations. Again, meta-ethical or second-order moral relativism may inform other kinds of relativism in terms of questions relating to the use of moral expressions employed.

Relativism is not nihilism. Moral relativism is the view that, truly speaking, there are not just nothing that we ought or ought not to do, endorse, or be like. Relativism, in all its forms, still retains the central notion that there are things we ought and ought not to do, endorse, or be like. Granted, the relativist may end up stating, for example, that what is right in one culture may not be right in another or that a certain thing is right for me but not for you. Nevertheless, the moral relativist still holds on to the idea that morality is prescriptive of values.

Perhaps, that is why, moral relativism is conceived by some scholars as a half-way house between moral scepticism and moral absolutism.²⁹ Whereas the sceptic denies the possibility of moral knowledge and moral absolutism is an assertion of rationality and unquestionable principles that hold without any exception with objective validity, with universalizability and without taking into consideration the consequences, moral relativism forms a serious challenge to absolute and universal moral judgments or principles. It involves both a threat to justification and to truth. There are no objective truths or objective justification. What is actual is that moral judgments and principles hold only in relativistic form. We may say that it also be taken as supporting evidence for the existence of irresolvable moral conflicts.

Subjectivism is another strong motivation for accepting moral scepticism. Subjectivism concerns the thoughts or feelings of the subject rather than the realities which are independent of his thoughts or feelings. In our context, we prefer to use the expression 'subjectivism' as the second-order thesis about the meanings of moral expressions. It is the doctrine that there is a relation between ethical predicates such as 'good and evil', 'desirable and undesirable', 'right and wrong', 'duty', 'obligation', etc., and our feelings, emotions and sentiments, such that ethical terms convey psychological information about the speaker and nothing more. In brief, it is, 'X is good' means 'I or we like X'. "Mercy killing is always wrong" is synonymous with "I or we abhor mercy killing". The subjectivist develops his position in one of the two ways: i) he may say that morality is not dependent on individual taste but on the natural desires of mankind taken as a whole. It is a contingent and not a necessary fact that people have the desires they do, so that given a change in human preferences morality could change. But as a matter of fact people do value certain things more than others, and morality is an expression of these collective tastes. Thus, "X is good" becomes "all, or most people (or all, or most people in my social group) desire X": ii) alternatively, the subjectivist may continue to rely on the individual, in the sense of ultimately regarding individual desire as the source of moral value. This would mean, for instance, that the moral judgment "X is good" would mean "X has certain qualities, a, b, c, and I approve of anything with those qualities".³⁰ Generally speaking, it is the view that moral judgments can never be considered apart from the question of who makes them and his subjective states of tastes, likes and attitudes. Hence, moral statements do not really have truth values. There are no moral facts. The only facts are facts about individual person's attitudes towards things. Most subjectivists, since they typically expect great variation in the attitudes of individuals

and hence, their morality, are likely also to be relativists. So, these two views often go hand in hand. But they are not identical concepts. Many forms of relativism do not include the belief that morality is grounded in the attitudes of individuals. We might even imagine a possible universal agreement in human attitudes about certain things, based on some psychological features of human beings. This is comparable to the hedonistic theory which derives the ought-statement that “Pleasure ought to be sought” as an inference from the psychological phenomenon that to desire pleasure and avoid pain is constitutive of human nature.

Subjectivism is likely to be confused with emotivism but prominent emotivists like A.J. Ayer and C.L. Stevenson are at pains to dissociate emotivism from subjectivism. As Ayer states, all value judgments are non-cognitive, are not assertions or statements ascribing properties to actions, persons or things. They are devoid of cognitive meaning and hence are not true or false. He does not contend that ethical judgments are assertions or reports of the psychological states of the speaker. An ethical judgment like “killing is wrong” is simply an *expression* of attitude or emotion of the speaker. Saying that “Killing is wrong” is like saying “Killing, boo?” Stevenson emphasizes the differences between the two in his earliest published work on emotivism.³¹ He distinguishes his position from what he called ‘interest theories’ and he “characterizes the latter as the view that ‘good’ means ‘*desired by me*’”.³² Stevenson never says that ethical terms convey psychological information about the speaker which is the subjectivist’s thesis. He would rather say that ethical terms *express*, and do not *report* the emotions of the speaker. Emotions are related with the attitudes of the speaker. Attitudes are related with ‘how we are going to act’. The major use of moral judgments, he said, “is not to indicate facts but to create an influence ... They recommend an interest in an object, rather than state that the interest

already exists ... The difference between the traditional interest theorists and my view is like the difference between describing a desert and irrigating it.”³³

Ayer also says that his theory differs in an important respect from the subjectivist theory. He says, “We reject the subjectivist’s view that to call an action right, or a thing good is to say that it is generally approved of, because it is not self-contradictory to assert that some actions which are generally approved of are not right, or that some things which are generally approved of are not good.”³⁴

What is, however, relevant for our purpose is the connection between subjectivism and moral scepticism. Subjectivism asserts a causally necessary connection between our judging something as ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and our having certain feelings towards or against. If all that it implies is, there are no objective moral values then, subjectivism is an important ally of moral scepticism.

In this connection, we shall discuss J.L. Mackie’s version of moral scepticism. He has characterized it as subjectivism. We shall return to that later. First, let us state Mackie’s theory. He begins the first chapter of his book, “*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*”³⁵ with the bald statement, “There are no objective values”, and he says that the view he is adopting may be called moral scepticism. He distinguishes between first order moral scepticism and second order moral scepticism. He characterizes his sceptical position as a second order view. First order and second order moral scepticisms are not merely distinct but completely independent: one could be a second order moral sceptic without being a first order one, or again the other way round. Mackie’s meta-ethical position makes him willing to grant that moral discourse has all the semantic features necessary to aim at truth, that it trades in genuine assertions, apt to be true or false as literally constructed, but it fails in this aim because the truth of

moral statements would call for items of metaphysically outlandish sort – queer properties, which seem to promise no hope of reduction to natural, factual properties.

Mackie's scepticism has a flavor of nihilism. He does not merely doubt morality, he denies it. This denial takes the form of arguing for (A) a moral "error theory" – the view that a moral discourse has the aim of securing the truth, but that (B) it systematically fails to do so. In arguing for (A) error theorists contrast with the cognitivists who claim that moral discourse does not consist of commands or expressions of emotion veiled in the indicative mood. In arguing for (B) the error theorists contrast with the advocates of moral realism.

Mackie claims that values are not objective, "are not parts of the fabric of the world". This claim is meant to include not only moral goodness, which might be most naturally equated with moral value, but also other things that could be more loosely called moral values or disvalues – rightness or wrongness, duty, obligation, an action's being rotten or contemptible and so on. Though Mackie's scepticism extends to non-moral values too, primarily aesthetic ones, on his own admission, we shall remain confined to moral values only.

Mackie does not deny that the kinds of behavior or action to which moral values and disvalues are ascribed are indeed parts of the furniture of the world, and so are the natural, descriptive differences, between them. Nobody would deny that there is a difference between a kind action and a cruel one, or that a coward and a brave man behave differently in the face of danger. We can learn, in fact, distinguish them fairly well in practice. But, their differences in value are not objective. Mackie raises the question - whether it is an equally hard fact that actions which are cruel are to be condemned. Mackie is not in doubt about the objectivity of the natural, factual

differences on the basis of which differing values are assigned. What he calls into question is the objectivity, especially, of the values themselves.

Mackie, according to whom, there are no objective values, holds that there is a strong relationship of entailment between subjectivism and moral scepticism, although Mackie, seeks to distinguish moral scepticism from subjectivism as a second order view in the following manner:

First, what I have called moral scepticism is a negative doctrine, not a positive one: it says what there isn't, not what there is. It says that there do not exist entities or relations of a certain kind, objective values or requirements, which many people have believed to exist. Of course, the moral sceptic cannot leave it at that. If his position is to be at all plausible, he must give some account of how other people have fallen into what he regards as an error, and this account will have to include some positive suggestions about how values fail to be objective, about what has been mistake for, or has led to false beliefs about, objective values. But this will be a development of his theory, not its core: its core is the negation. Secondly, what I have called moral scepticism is an ontological thesis, not a linguistic or conceptual one. It is not, like the other doctrines often called moral subjectivism, a view about the meanings of moral statements.³⁶

Mackie observes that those who have accepted moral subjectivism as the doctrine that moral judgment are equivalent to the reports of the speaker's own feelings or attitudes have usually presupposed what he calls moral scepticism. Because, the subjectivist has assumed that there are no objective values and that he has fallen back on feelings and attitudes for the analysis of moral statements. Mackie further says:

... if all our moral statements were such subjective reports, it would follow that, at least so far as we are aware, there are no objective moral values. If we were aware of them, we would say something about them. In this sense, this sort of subjectivism entails moral scepticism. But the converse entailment does not hold ... No doubt if moral values are not objective they are in some broad sense subjective, and for that reason I would accept 'moral subjectivism' as an alternative name to 'moral scepticism'.³⁷

In support of his error theory Mackie advances arguments of two main kinds, which he calls (1) the argument from relativity and (2) the argument from queerness.

(1) Mackie draws on the "well known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community".³⁸

Relativity provides him the most common argument against moral facts. Because it provides the basis for an inductive inference to the best explanation and does not require any allegiance to objective moral facts.

(2) More important, however, is Mackie's argument from queerness. According to him, this argument has two parts, (i) metaphysical, and (ii) epistemological.

(2) (i). According to Mackie, "If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe."³⁹ Moore's non-natural qualities represent such queer entities or qualities, according to Mackie.

2. (ii). The epistemological ground says that objective moral values cannot be known by our ordinary ways of knowing such as "sense perception or introspection or the framing and confirming of explanatory hypotheses or inference or logical construction or conceptual analysis, or any combination of these ..."⁴⁰ Hence, "... if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else."⁴¹ The 'faculty of moral intuition' talked about by the intuitionists is an example of this. 'A special sort of intuition', Mackie says, is a lame answer, but it is the one to which the objectivist is compelled to resort.

(3) Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has spotted a psychological dimension of the argument from queerness. This psychological aspect is about the queer relation that moral facts bear to motives and reasons for actions. Mackie says that objective moral values would have a "power, when known, automatically to influence the will". "... if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built in it."⁴² What Mackie is driving at is the relationship between motivational powers and distinct existences.

Thus Mackie's position call the 'error theory' has the consequence of a huge scepticism about the objectivity of ethical values.

The rise of non-cognitive meta-ethical thinking in the second half of the 20th Century makes out a case for moral scepticism. Non-cognitive meta-ethical theories are theories about the analysis of moral expressions – moral terms and moral judgments. The main questions are: What is the nature of moral terms and moral judgments? What is their function or use in language? How are moral judgments justified? And so on. Non-cognitivism in ethics challenges the truth claims of moral judgments. If knowledge is of truths, then it plainly follows that moral judgments do not express knowledge; and if moral sentences are not cognitive at all, then there is presumably neither moral knowledge nor justified moral belief. According to it, analysis of moral discourse reveals that there is no cognitive content of moral judgments. Moral judgments do not talk about or refer to things, facts, relations or properties in the world. They have only certain functions to perform as items of language. There are two main non-cognitive meta-ethical theories: emotivism pioneered by C.L. Stevenson and prescriptivism propounded by R.M. Hare. We shall have a look at them below.

A) **Emotivism:** The origin of emotivism is traced to Hume's 'Theory of Passions' – passion as the motivation of human action'.⁴³ It is also adumbrated by Urmson. However, the development of emotivism in its present form is the work of C.L. Stevenson. According to Stevenson, moral sentences have no cognitive function, but rather a quasi-imperative force which operating through suggestion and intensified by our tone of voice readily permits us to influence or to modify another person's behavior. Moral judgments are not used to report or convey information about the state of the mind of the speaker. Moral

judgments do have meaning but it is not cognitive meaning with a descriptive emphasis. Moral judgments have a predominant emotive meaning, having the persuasive function of redirecting the action or behavior of the hearer. The emotive theory has been put forward in Stevenson's *Facts and Values* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963] and more strongly in *Ethics and Language* [Haven: Yale University Press, 1944].

B) **Prescriptivism:** Prescriptivism as a meta-ethical theory of moral language is propounded by R.M. Hare. It is elaborated in his works such as *Language of Morals* [London: OUP, 1964.] and *Freedom and Reason* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963] and others. According to Hare, moral judgments are prescriptive in function. They are designed to answer the question: "What shall I do?" As such, moral evaluations have logical affinity with imperative sentences. They both belong to the genus 'prescriptive language'. Unlike an indicative or descriptive sentence a moral judgment is *not* used for telling someone that something is the case; it is used for telling someone to do something. Prescriptive sentences have a different function to perform. They do not describe anything nor do they express factual claims or beliefs and therefore, are neither true nor false. Hence, Hare's prescriptivism challenges any attempt to reduce moral judgments and imperatives to factual statements. It will

also challenge the validity of deriving evaluative conclusions from purely factual premises.

Whether it is emotivism or prescriptivism, what binds them together is the denial that there are moral facts and that moral knowledge is possible. Both Stevenson and Hare speak of a cognitive content in moral judgments. Stevenson brings it under the descriptive meaning of a moral judgment. Hare also speaks of the cognitive meaning of prescriptive judgments which incorporates the criteria of application of the moral terms. But such descriptive components are subsidiary to the dominant or primary emotive meaning or prescriptive meaning, as the case may be.

We may mention one point. Neither emotivism nor prescriptivism is a sceptical theory *per se*. But each lends an indirect support to moral scepticism by laying emphasis on the logical functions of moral terms rather than their reference. In this sense, both contribute to a use theory of meaning. Both the theories, we may say, are concerned with moral expressions as language games. Stevenson would prefer the game of making moral judgments a matter of one's predisposition, like or dislike, and directing another's choice. Hare would speak of the language game of command as the primary function of moral expressions. But none of them would favor a cognitive stand in their meta-ethical theory. Hence, they have the potential to be both influential and have significant impact upon the question of the possibility of moral knowledge.

Of these two non-cognitivist meta-ethical theories, Stevenson's emotivism is more closely related to moral scepticism. It is due to emotivism's inability to accommodate the possibility of rational arguments and that of giving reasons in support of decisions in ethics. This is a position which has generally been favored by every moral sceptic. If moral judgments are expressive of emotions, it is not amenable

to reason. We can only try to persuade the other party, and win him over to our own position. Arguing rationally is *a contradiction in terms*.

However, one thing common to both emotivism and prescriptivism is that they remain non-committal about the existence of objective moral values and this paves the way to scepticism.

These are some of the arguments which have been offered in support of moral scepticism. Some of them, it appears are hard to refute. However, we shall look into the plausibility of these arguments and try to find some way out of moral scepticism, wherever possible. That will form our task in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

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CHAPTER IV

CONSIDERATION OF THE GROUNDS OF MORAL SCEPTICISM

In this chapter we are going to consider the strength of the arguments on the basis of which moral scepticism is advanced and which provide direct or indirect support to it.

I

Bernard Williams' view that moral judgments are not objective depends starts from considerations about disagreement, specifically moral disagreement. Disagreement in ethics is not surprising. The explanation disagreement in ethics, Williams agrees, depends on the disanalogy between science and ethics. Williams' arguments, as we will see, are extremely rich and rewarding and at the same time too sophisticated and complex in the sense that the central strand of argument embraces a range of subsidiary arguments. This makes the task of meeting the issues he raises about ethical knowledge and objectivity a difficult task but not an impossible one.

The disanalogy Williams draws between science and ethics is a truism. The way science functions is not the way in which ethics does. To be objective like science ethics has to describe or refer to facts. If the facts are such and such anyone who believes them to be so is correct and his belief is *true*; anyone who believes them to be something different is mistaken, and this belief is false. It is a cardinal point of science that the truth or falsity of a belief depends wholly on what the facts are, not on whether anyone holds it. However unlikely it might be, it is always possible for anyone to be mistaken on a certain point of fact. This is the sort of language that we

must be prepared to use if we call something ‘an objective matter’ the thesis that moral judgments are objective, in effect, is the thesis that this sort of language can properly be used about them.

However, there are moral philosophers who represent moral judgments as objective but would not apply the empirical factual, scientific discourse to them. It is the fact that we use objective terminology in moral matters; that we say ‘this is good’ rather than ‘I approve of this’. But moral objectivity cannot be construed in terms of scientific objectivity. Hence, it appears a bit surprising that Bernard Williams would try to argue that objectivity in morality is hard to get in line with scientific objectivity.

Let us see, what more is involved in scientific objectivity than that pointed out by Williams. These are explicitness and systematicness. These are, however, dependent on the notion of objectivity. The notion of objectivity is central and the other two are related to it in way very special. The notion of explicitness implies that some statements are made about some *thing* (object) in such a way that the thing or the object is made explicit through some statements. What is made explicit through these statements is an object.¹ Systematicness implies to delimit the relevant from among the multitude of factors. That is, we have to strip off the irrelevancies to get at the depersonalized and objectified. One form of depersonalization is in factualized information for to factualize is to systematize. Thus, whether in industry for mass production or in community living, an urge for standardization and systematicness is required. Thus, it seems quite reasonable to conclude that both explicitness and systematicness have a common goal – to attain objectivity, to depersonalize the truth.

The notion of objectivity may be related to the idea of explicitness by putting the object at the centre. That is, an idea or information is said to be objective, if and

only if, it pertains to an object and not to any subject. The separation or distinction between the informer, the subject and the information about the object has been an integral part of the process which guides scientific activities.² Science is objective in the sense that scientific activity may be characterized as a search for objectivity. It is true that the notion of objectivity is always associated with science but the notion of scientific objectivity itself is not very clear. It can be understood in two senses.

In one sense, the notion of objectivity is often equated with consensus or agreement. It is no more the object *per se* that is important but what people say about it or what we can do with it. Thus we find that the notion of objectivity is associated with the notion of “object” or with some kind of agreement. This notion of objectivity is closely related to the realistic conception of science. The other view of objectivity relies on a large amount of human resource, in other words, the society at large. In either case, what is missing is the point that objectivity is an inter-subjective principle of great usefulness. Objectivity cannot exist apart from the inter-subjective convention. Objectivity is constituted by and for specific objectives and as such is utilitarian in character, concerned with objects that can be attained. Only definite objectives create regions of objectivity.

What about morality? Our reflection may proceed in two ways. We shall try to show that morality can never be dissociated from the concept of the subject or the agent. But the association is also compatible with objectivity. Ethics is about moral judgments and moral problems. At the heart of moral judgments exists the moral agent. A moral judgment is an evaluation of the action or conduct of the moral agent. Morality is, in an important sense, agent-centric. However, the moral agent is not a solitary individual. He functions in a background of society, its systems of

conceptualization, cultural forms and standards. His openness to evaluations and his capacity to act in the same way integrate him into a pattern of conduct, relationships with others and acknowledgement of his incorporation in the social order. So, in matters moral, objectivity in the sense of convergence of viewpoints is not unlikely to take place. Here, actions cannot be purely idiosyncratic though they are autonomous choices. Objectivity in morality therefore, does not mean correspondence with how the world is at any given point of time. Objectivity means universalizability. Universalizability is common to all employments of value words. Being universalizable is a distinct feature of the evaluative employment of language. Anyone who understands moral discourse knows that if he is to behave as a moral being, there is no question of his being unfair or unprincipled. He can equally demand, from others in like situations, not to be unprincipled or unfair. We speak of justifying conduct. The request for justification is a matter of trying to search for its objectivity. If moral conduct were arbitrary, the question of justifying conduct would not have made any sense. That we speak of giving moral reasons or moral arguments shows that there must be an objective view used by the respective moral agents informing moral judgments. It is true that, morality leaves quite a lot open but it also fixes a great deal. We can quite objectively claim that some moral judgments are objective and some moral arguments are sound. We say quite objectively that Hitler's treatment of the Jews was morally reprehensible. We, in moral arguments, say that something is just wrong, for example – the murder of an innocent human being in police custody – no matter what the context is or for what reasons it is done. We do have general agreement either intra-culturally or across cultures.

However, we want to note one point. With the passage of time there is progress of science and technology. The general trend is improvement in the qualities

of mathematics, science, medicine and engineering, in the long run. This is, however, not matched by an accompanying burst of development with regard to morality. How science advances in a civilization does not necessarily have a co-relation to how civilization advances in it. We have to be aware of the fact that there may also be decline in sciences as happened due to the opposition of Church fathers in medieval Europe. And there is the glaring example of Nazi Germany as a case of moral decline. So, neither science nor morality improves due to the passage of time. They improve due to human effort and struggle.

To confront Williams' questioning of objectivity in ethics more fully, we need to confront the crucial issue of the contrast between science and morality. It appears from the contrast drawn by him that 'absolutism' stands for science, seen by many, as beyond all particular view-points. Relativism is usually associated with ethics, where debate is often difficult and therefore avoided on the principle that "in matters of tastes, disputes are futile". Williams distinguishes sharply between science and ethics. We have already stated it in Chapter III. Yet, let us provide a brief recapitulation. According to him, as regards science, we can hope that, on each question, our inquiries will show a convergence on an answer. And the best explanation of the convergence involves 'the idea that the answer represents how things are'. This is because our scientific concepts are linked *causally* to what happens in the world. Moreover, Williams' holds that science can provide a basis for an absolute conception of the world. In his words, this conception is 'to a maximum degree independent of our perspective and its peculiarities'. On the other hand, as regard ethics, Williams is convinced that we cannot hope that our enquiries will yield any such convergence guided by the way things are. There is no causal effect of the world on the way we define and use ethical concepts, like right or duty, good or evil.

That this distinction has been overdrawn or that the science-ethics issue has been polarized too much is the view of commentators of Williams.³ Louis Caruana is of the opinion that Williams employs a simplified version of both science and ethics. In fact, reflection will show that science is not as absolutistic as he takes it to be. Nor is ethics as relativistic as he seems to imply. In science, for the account of world-guided convergence all that we need to give is that there is a causal explanation that stretches from entities in the world to our observation and theory. This is a simple picture and is not enough. Caruana observes:

To be realistic, we need to consider science in its entirety. We need to stretch all the way from the theoretical entities in the world via experimental outcome in their being observed, via interpretation of results, publication of papers, and thence via the whole international complex of debates and negotiations that result in a consensus being reached. Consensus regarding particular experimental findings, such as the consensus on the value of the charge of the electron, is simple. In such cases a high-degree of world-guided convergence may be expected. Consensus as regards the acceptability of an entire theory, however, is very complex. There is no clear idea of world-guided convergence here.⁴

The upshot is that Williams is exaggerating the element of world-guided convergence in science. Science is not as absolutistic as he thinks. As regards ethics Williams' judgments is exaggerated in the opposite sense. He seriously undermines

the objectivity of ethical theories. Let us take Caruana's example: the Greek theory of virtue as a disposition needed for the optimal human well-being. This cannot be optimized by purely conventional means. It must be anchored on some human needs, essential biological needs, for example, the need for food. Virtues are linked to such naturalistic consideration.

Any discussion, therefore, on a particular virtue may be inscribed within a converging enquiry commanded by objective factors, namely, by what really aids towards the optimization of well-being. The consequence is that ethics is not necessarily as relativistic as Williams seems to imply in his dichotomy between science and ethics.⁵

In line with these reflections, Caruana has argued that science and ethics can be seen as quite similar because they both have an objective dimension and a perspectival dimension. He defends an element of objectivity for both science and ethics, leaning neither towards rigid absolutism nor towards global relativism. And such an understanding of objectivity he calls "open-objectivity". Part of this response depends on, first, defending the role of precedents as proposed by Nicholas Jardine⁶ within moral enquiry. In terms of precedents, the idea of open-objectivity involves not world-guided convergence but precedent-guided convergence. In philosophy of law the judgments and the decisions set a precedent. They are considered the source of rules to be applied to new cases.

A belief is justified by precedent. The belief is supported by methods considered reliable by testing against independently warranted precedents and standards. This model holds for both science and ethics. In science, instruments are

calibrated and research strategies are promoted or attacked by appeal to their track records. The Newtonian paradigm set a precedent for many generations. Caruana refers to Urbain J.J. le Verrier, a prominent scientist during the 18th Century, who postulated the existence of the planet Neptune by using the excellent track record of Newton's theory.⁷

Something similar happens in ethics. We often reason morally by appealing to precedents. We may take slavery being unjust and insupportable as an example. Previous societies in various historical periods rationalized their practice of slavery in some way right. It may be conceived of as 'natural' or akin to a natural misfortune or as in fact a benevolent form of paternalism. But all of these alleged justifications are so utterly discredited that there is no prospect of their revival. There may, nevertheless, be some point of rehearsing those arguments in spite of their vindictory character, to highlight the unreasonableness of those who failed to find them compelling. Let us return to what Caruana has to say. He claims:

... both scientific and ethical inquiry proceeds as a plausible form of open- objectivity. The idea of precedent-guided convergence corresponding to the case law approach is open in the sense that past experience is considered a source of education on how to face the future without renouncing the responsibility of breaking new ground. It is objective in the sense that it is not arbitrary decision-making. In this perspective, we accept the reality of a certain continuity in history and yet we accept the deep changes at the level of the rules or methods ...⁸

Caruana's second way of accounting for "open-objectivity" resorts to making the distinction between primary and secondary precepts. Let us now turn to Caruana's second way of accounting for open-objectivity which involves making the distinction between primary and secondary precepts. The primary precepts of ethics are universal. But they are meant for application to specific cases through various secondary principles, which are variable. That we should return the goods which are held in trust is an immutable moral principle, but we are not to return a knife held in trust to a man who has gone mad. This is how Socrates refutes Polymarchus' definition of justice as "returning to every man what is due to him." Here we have a secondary precept formulated according to circumstances, and there is a kind of relativity in it. This kind of relativity does not affect the morality of our action. Even though the precept is expressed relative to the circumstances, it is still morally binding. The element of open-objectivity lies here.

Caruana claims that the same point may be made in science:

Many philosophers and scientists assume that there is a single, uniform subject called "science" that is pursued by all scientists in their investigations. This is severely inadequate. What we see is not a single discipline but numerous sciences each with a different concern. And this is evident when investigating the same object. Take for instance, the melting of the ice on the polar ice-cape. Meteorologists study this phenomenon from a physical and climatological point of view, whereas zoologists study the same melting of the ice from a zoological

point of view and ecologists from the ecological point of view.⁹

Caruana concludes that the element of relativism lies here. The data that is relevant for the physicist is different from the data relevant for the zoologist or a climatologist. What is true, in the sense of being relevant, for the meteorologist is not true for the zoologist. "It is not true, or rather it is beyond truth and falsity, because it lies beyond the zoologist's horizon." This again shows that science and ethics are not as different as Williams seems to imply. Both disciplines have an objective dimension and a relativist or perspectival dimension. The first way is by precedent-guided convergence and the second is in terms of primary and secondary precepts.

Williams' doubt against the objectivity of ethics, more precisely, ethical theories, is formulated depending on the distinction between thick and thin ethical concepts. There are, what he calls, thick or substantive concepts. They are also "world-guided", that is their application is determined by "how the world is like." One of the things this means is that people who have acquired them will typically agree about their application to particular cases. Thick ethical concepts are also "action-guided", in the sense that if "a concept of that kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action, though that reason need not be a decisive one and may be outweighed by other reasons".¹⁰ Examples of the thick concepts are 'treachery', 'promise', 'brutality', 'courage' etc. The thick concepts are contrasted with a second group of concepts, which we may call "thin." The thin concepts are "general and abstract", and they "do not display world-guidedness".¹¹ Examples of these concepts are 'good', 'right', and 'ought'. How does this relate to our concern? According to Williams, ethical theories whether deontological, contractual or

utilitarian all neglect thick ethical concepts in favor of the thin. It has the consequence that an ethical theory does not take the thick ethical concepts seriously and thus, neglects the complexity of ethical concepts we live with – our actual ethical lives are thicker, more variegated and richer than an ethical theory can acknowledge. The abstract and general thin ethical concepts like ‘right’, ‘good’ and ‘ought’ are not ‘world-guided’ and as the phrase ‘not world-guided’ itself suggest what it means is that Williams does not think that judgments using ‘ought’, etc., are objective. Thus, as far as he is concerned, there is no objective subject matter for an “ethical theory” to be about.

Williams’ distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts suggests that people agree in the majority of cases in the application of thick concepts which are world-guided. We do sometimes converge in our ethical beliefs, and those beliefs do sometime merit the title of knowledge. This can happen when the beliefs in question involve thick ethical concepts. People, for example, who use the concepts of justice or gratitude might have no difficulty in agreeing, and indeed in knowing whether a certain act is just or an act of gratitude. The notion of thick ethical concepts is an extremely important one for Williams. He is prepared to say that the judgments people make by using their thick concepts can both express truth and amount to a body of knowledge. This makes us optimistic that at least in one area in ethics Williams grants knowledge, and is not an ethical sceptic. But this optimism is short lived because his claim that reflection can destroy knowledge takes away the assurance that there is moral knowledge. Williams recognizes that whatever ethical knowledge people have, they are exercising their thick ethical concepts unwaveringly and with minimal reflection. The members of a ‘hyper traditional’ society, he says, may use their concepts unreflectively as a method of finding [their] way in [their]

social world. “But when someone stands back from the practices of the society and its use of concepts and asks whether it is the right way to go on”, such knowledge tends to be undermined.

These points seem to imply that we have less ethical knowledge all the time. Of course, Williams does suggest that some thick ethical concepts can “stand up to reflection”, so that we do not run out of ethical knowledge entirely. He also suggests that “ethical knowledge... is not necessarily the best ethical state” and what is more important is something he calls *confidence*, which one can have without knowledge. He also says that confidence enables individuals to abide by their thick ethical concepts despite the unsettling effects of reflection. But how thick ethical concepts can manage to withstand reflection and why reflection should not destroy confidence as surely as it can destroy knowledge – are questions which Williams regards philosophy as incompetent to answer. For answer we have to fall back on social sciences.

Williams’ conception of different social worlds sustaining different thick ethical concepts does leave room for some form of relativism, which Williams calls “*the relativism of distance*”.¹² This doctrine is defined in terms of a distinction Williams draws between ‘real’ and ‘notional’ confrontations. He writes:

A real confrontation between two divergent outlooks occurs at a given time if there is a group of people for whom each of the outlooks is a real option. A notional confrontation, by contrast, occurs when some people know about two divergent outlooks, but at least one of those outlooks does not present a real option.¹³

He also says:

... only when a society is sufficiently ‘close’ to ours which is to say roughly, only when it is a real option for us to adopt the ethical outlook of that society, is there any question of *appraising* its ethical outlook (as ‘right’, ‘wrong’ or whatever).¹⁴

He, however, denies that some appraisal of the ethical outlooks of distant societies is allowed, and may even, in the specific case of appraisal with respect to justice, be required.

Williams makes heavy use of the distinction between ‘the thick’ and ‘the thin’ to buttress his sceptical position about ethical theory and respect for the complexity of ethical life. We must see, however, that the distinction is not at all a clear one. Samuel Scheffler puts the matter thus:

Consider the following concepts, for example: justice, fairness, and impartiality, to take one cluster of notions; liberty, equality, freedom of expression, to take another; privacy, self-respect, envy, to take a third; needs, well-being, and interests, to take a fourth; and rights, autonomy, and consent, for a fifth. Are the concepts on this list thick or thin? If they are all thick, that suggests that contemporary ethical theories are far more concerned with thick concepts than Williams allows, for surely they are concerned with the concepts on this list. If on the other hand, these concepts are all thin, that

suggests that the class of thin concepts is much more diverse than Williams indicates, so that even if current ethical theories are preoccupied with thin concepts, this preoccupation may not involve the kind of gross oversimplification that was earlier alleged. And if some of the concepts on the list are thick while others are thin, then each of the two foregoing conclusions is supported to some extent.¹⁵

In fact, it is impossible to classify the concepts on the list as either thick or thin. We have seen that Williams associates thick concepts with specificity and world-guidedness and thin concepts with generality and lack of world-guidedness. But it is far from clear how we are supposed to tell whether a particular concept is world-guided or not. Every single ethical concept appears to be determined, to some extent, at least, by what the world is like. Williams, as we have stated, says that people generally agree in their application of thick ethical concepts. But he explicitly denies that agreement is *sufficient* for world-guidedness. In any case, agreement or disagreement in the application of concepts and the features of specificity and generality are matters of degree. One may also wonder whether any division of ethical concepts into thick and thin is itself an oversimplification. Our ethical life is marked by a vocabulary, which is rich and diverse and the ethical concepts we use vary along different dimensions. So it is doubtful that the distinction Williams draws can be maintained coherently and hence, whether his scepticism about the objectivity of ethics which leans heavily on this distinction can be sustained. The distinction is not as congenial to Williams' ethical scepticism as he wants it to be.

It should be noted in addition, in this connection, that even if there were no objectively correct conception or theory of the good life for man, but only various competing ideas, some aspects of the “scientific” mode of objectivity (we have already elaborated this in Chapter III and have taken critical notice of it in the foregoing discussions) might still be applicable. For example, even if the wrongness of killing the innocent were taken to be a matter of its incompatibility, not with the objectively best life, but with a certain ideal of the good life, the fact that such killing was indeed incompatible with the ideal might still serve to explain a convergence of beliefs about the wrongness of killing among those who shared the ideal. So it is difficult to see why the “scientific” model of objectivity would be inappropriate for ethics.

II

Let us now take up moral relativism as giving support to moral scepticism. Cultural diversity is itself proof that truth is relative. If truth is relative then it has implications for the objectivity of moral claims. The argument from moral relativism cannot be brushed aside easily. Relativism particularly has been extremely influential in contemporary culture. Relativism and Absolutism enshrine radically opposed viewpoints. The dream which the absolutists had, to grasp the world in its totality through complete, final and absolutely certain descriptions, made possible presumably by an ultimate grounding of knowledge, science, philosophy and language, has been denounced as a delusion. The thesis that the mind is able to mirror nature as it is by itself is challenged. Instead, whether we try to understand real things and events, or the findings of science, or historical epochs, or contemporary social and political phenomena, or different cultures, or institutions, or human nature and action, or

sacred and literary texts, we hear voices telling us that there are no hard facts of the matter, unconditioned by our own varied ways of understanding, pertaining to any of these. There are no absolute standards too, which can single out one such way as *the* final and completely correct way of understanding. Under the circumstance we face two extreme positions: the absolutist, which claims that there are such standards to hit upon, one complete and correct account of any of the so-called hard facts, and the relativist, which reasserts the ancient Protagorean dictum: “Man is the measure of all things” taking it to express the relativity of things to thought, language, point of view, culture, and also of perceptions and judgments of individual subjects, ending eventually with the notorious adage – ‘anything goes’. Can there be a third position, however, which moves beyond the extremes, retaining right relativistic insights without ushering in intellectual and moral anarchy? Indeed, a new conversation has emerged introducing various positions which seek to avoid the extremes.

To explore the possibility, a careful examination of relativistic doctrines is urgently needed. The issues debated by the extreme positions must also be readdressed. The main issues are:

Things exist independently, and should therefore be described in their *own* terms, that is, in terms of properties they possess *intrinsically*, not as objects of someone’s experience. Only such a description can be uniquely true, for variations in description result from the intervention of subjects experiencing these objects in different ways. Relativists dismiss this absolute conception of reality as an empty idea. The world we can meaningfully talk about is one that is conceptualized, interpreted and described from various perspectives. We know it only through conceptions, languages, many of which may resist translation, and through modes of discourse, ‘forms of life’, ‘paradigms’, or world-views which may be

incommensurable. 'Different-worlds', the relativists by and large maintain, are products of different world-views. But from the fact that we do not know the world apart from conceptions, descriptions and interpretations, does it follow that it is *created* by our ways of conceiving, speaking and interpreting? Does relativism lead ineluctably to a subjectivist and constructivist ontology? Let us try to answer it.

It is true that no two individuals or societies are exactly alike, neither in their own natures, nor in their circumstances. Therefore, their moralities will never be exactly the same. Where the differences are slight, however, a single moral theory that covers both cases will be comparatively unitary, where the term 'relativism' will be inappropriate. It is worth noticing that there is no logical incoherence in a theory that maintains that even when morality varies substantially in individuals and societies such that only the most rudimentary moral precepts may be summarized in a single unitary theory, nevertheless, all these moralities are objective in a crucial sense that they are independent of the will. Your obligations may be quite different from anyone else's, but they are there nevertheless regardless of whether you want it to be. Even radical versions of relativism ought to be free from these morally complacent implications. All that such theories do lack with regard to objectivity is universality, and even this is true only in certain respects. All we require here to recognize is that if a certain action is demanded in any situation then a similar action may also be demanded in any situation similar to the first in all morally relevant ways. But since the moral features of a situation would also include features about the agent and since these will vary, different responses from agents may be permissible. No two situations will be exactly alike. The formal conditions of universalizability will provide only minimum restrictions on the actual content of a moral theory. At least this would seem to be so if the condition is understood in a way in which Hare does. But it will

prove to be more difficult to get past Kant, in view of the latter's exceedingly severe strictures on the possible role of inclinations as morally relevant features.

In this understanding we can see that there is more than one way in which something can be said to be objective. It is that morality is not what we want it to be. Moral demands are not expressions of the will but corrective of it in the sense that moral considerations often provide unwelcome criticisms of our behavior and this phenomenon cannot be wished out of existence. A person may be free to adopt whatever principles he chooses, but he is not free to decide whether such principles are virtuous or not, nor can he get away with the claim that it is virtuous for him even if for nobody else. Likewise, a type of activity may be demanded or abhorred in a society, but it in no way follows that that society is right to do so: for human societies like human individuals may be morally corrupt. It seems incredible that anyone can doubt these facts. For what can be more obvious than that humanity both individually and collectively are subject to moral error. To raise such doubts is responsible for the subjectivism which pervades relativism.

We may probe more fruitfully into the matter if we try to understand cognitive relativism. Relativism has not only started a new metaphysical discourse, but has also been a pathway to a new epistemology. Since none of the 'versions' can be shown to correspond to an undescribed world, none can qualify as true, if correspondence to an undescribed, interpretation-independent world is what is meant by absolute truth and if this is the kind of truth which one has to achieve to have knowledge, then does it not seem that relativism collapses into scepticism because it denies the possibility of knowing such truth? Radical sceptics recognize absolute truth as the only variety of truth, and then taking its unattainability as premise; draw the conclusion that

knowledge is impossible. But simply because we cannot attain an impossible to know both matters of fact and matters of value? Even if absolute truth is unattainable, the relativists point out, we can still make judgments about truth and rightness which are of a different variety. Truth and rightness are *relative*, they urge, embracing cognitive and moral relativism.

But what does *relative truth* mean? Is it merely what is held by different individuals or societies, or in different contexts? But if true belief is the same as belief *held*, then is it not superfluous to say that the latter is *true*? Besides, will this equation leave room for false beliefs? Again, if true belief is what is *agreed* to by people holding it, then will not truth be reduced to *agreement* or *consensus* which may or may not depend on objective constraints? What exactly is meant by this agreement? Is it group unanimity which is ‘paradigm’-bound and sociological, or is it unanimity *per se*? Or is it a limiting notion - something which the entire community of inquirers is destined to reach at the end of enquiry assuming that there will be such an end? In that case the notion of truth as agreement, though understood in relation to human inquirers, will tend to slide back towards an absolute conception. Alternatively, if true belief is what people holding it *assert justifiably* under specific conditions, then will not truth be confounded with *justified assertability*? In case they are, then will not those who equate the two be driven into saying mistakenly that a sentence can be true for a person at a time under one condition, and later becomes false because the conditions of justification have changed? Relativists, however, need not be held guilty on this score, for what they mean when they claim that a statement, say ‘there is a chair in the room’ is *relatively true* is that it is due in its place or context. And to claim that it is true in its context is to claim that it could be justified were epistemic conditions *ideal* or *good enough* with respect to that statement in that context. Since,

epistemically ideal conditions are construed strictly with respect to some specific statement in some specific situation, the statement referred to above, which was true at a time when the requisite specific conditions obtained, does not become false when these conditions changed, when normal eyesight under normal conditions, for instance, is replaced by use of electron microscope. Truth understood relatively is to be equated with *idealized* justified assertability, not with justified assertability. *Mutatis mutandis* these points and counter-points and the questions they problematize will arise with reference to views concerning moral and social normativity.

The doctrine that truth is relative has been strongly deplored. It is seen as a component of irrationalism in view of the ramification it has for both theoretical and practical life. If there is no single absolute truth then what is there for science to aim at and discover? To what can we appeal to adjudicate the claims of competing scientific paradigms showing that some constellations of beliefs these represent, are right and others wrong? Similarly, if there are no universal moral principles which everyone does will be deemed right and immune to criticism. And if there is no effective means of rejecting error and accepting what is right in both realms of thought and action, then *prima-facie* there will be no progress. However, relativists may point out that objective absolute verities, far from facilitating progress hinder it. For as chosen goals of inquiry they seem to carry the idea that both intellectual and moral pursuits can reach the end of the road where there is no need to progress further.

One thing to be pointed out is that from the fact that societies have different values it is not an impossible task to derive some non-relative principles governing the attitude of one society to another. There are features of morality that make it

difficult to regard a morality as applying only to a group. Even though a tribal morality may apply only to members of the tribe, it progressively comes to range over persons as such. Values, furthermore, come to be internalized and cannot evaporate when one confronts people in other societies. Relativity in standards or tests does not imply that people of different societies do not understand each other. Cultures, sub-cultures, fragments of cultures, meet one another and interact. A way of life which is absolutely incommensurable is a rare thing. If we are going to accommodate the relativist's concern then, as Bernard Williams says:

... we must not simply draw a line between ourselves and others. We must not draw a line at all, but recognize that others are at varying distances from us. We must also see that our reactions and relations to other groups are themselves part of our ethical life, and we should understand these reactions more realistically in terms of the practices and sentiments that help to shape our life. Some disagreements and divergences matter more than others. Above all, it matters whether the contrast of our outlook with another is one that makes a difference, whether a question has to be resolved about what life is going to be lived by one group or the other.¹⁶

When they are confronted with another culture, people must react to it. They cannot switch off their ethical reactions. They do so by applying their existing notions. This shows that the ethical thought of a given culture can always stretch beyond its boundaries. Even if, this does not bring about convergence of divergent ethical beliefs, this fact will not imply relativism. "Each outlook may still be making

claims it intends to apply to the whole world, not just to that part of it which is its 'own' word."¹⁷

It is true that when we face a culture unfamiliar to us it looks like an 'encounter', but this does not mean we do not understand it. A Tibetan prefers tea flavored by rancid yak's butter. One may not share his preference. But this does not mean he does not understand the Tibetan's special preference. Such contingent principles surely survive in morality as it does in matters of taste. People do care, for example, that individuals should not in everything be sacrificed for the good of others, or that the unborn should be counted as a person. We, as experience shows, are ready to fight for our moral beliefs. Yet, in fact, there is most surprising and rather moving agreement between peoples whose civilizations are completely different, and who may even be culturally isolated from each other. What relativism argues for is an "emphasis on the worth of many ways of life", but does not mean to judge and destroy those which do not dovetail with our own. Societies' values, in some way, seek to understand and harmonize goals.¹⁸

The fear that the recognition of moral relativity leads to moral scepticism is unjustified. We venture to say that the recognition of moral relativity can make a positive contribution to the resolution of important moral problems, such as, moral tolerance and the equal worth of every person in society. There have been moral philosophers who have argued in favor of moral relativism's contribution to equal worth. Morality is essentially a transcendence of the self and relating oneself to the not-self. This not-self or the other may be my next door neighbor, my friend, colleague, another community, another religion, in a sense, the world at large. We are not here talking of losing one's self entirely: a complete loss of self is not desirable.

The self does belong to some group that contains interests and values which often conflict with those of others. Yet, in a pluralistic society the isolation of the individual is sought to be ended, so that despite their considerable differences they are more likely to accept others, and suspend the use of evaluative categories for them.

The problem with relativism is that it seeks to preserve consistency between from my point of view “X is right” and from his point of view “X is wrong” and these are accepted as logically compatible statements. But when interpreted, they become statements about preferences of individuals rather than the attributes of prescribed actions. It seems that something central to morality is lost by this way of understanding. The difficulty is that every problem of moral disagreement that helps the reasoners to relativize becomes impossible even to state if one’s position is construed consistently in this way. If I say “X is right” and you say “X is wrong”, we think we are disagreeing about something. But in a relativistic framework, they rather become reports on the characteristics of perspectives or points of view rather than statements about attributes of action ‘X’, and consequently, moral disagreements, as we commonly understand them, become impossible even to state. Thus, the real problem for a relativist is to avoid this problem.

Gilbert Harman¹⁹ offers an example of stating fundamental moral disagreement within relativistic framework by making a distinction between inner judgment and outer judgment. The question still remains as to how satisfactory is his position. What we feel is that there is a dilemma involved here which may be called subjectivist’s dilemma. If S interprets his moral values as applying to others who disagree with him, he is led to arbitrary imposition, and if they do not, then he is without any means even of stating fundamental moral disagreements. So, the dilemma lies in choosing a

position. He must either accept arbitrary imposition or render dubious the sense in which he occupies a moral position at all. Whatever position he chooses is problematic.

However, Harman's defense of moral relativism in terms of 'inner judgments' is subtle enough to withstand the usual criticisms of it and therefore, needs careful scrutiny. Harman claims that inner judgments make sense only in relation to an implicit agreement among a group of people about their relations with one another. He tells us that his thesis about inner judgments is a 'soberly logical thesis'. Inner judgments include judgments that someone ought or ought not to do something or that it was right or wrong of him to do it. They do not include judgments in which we say, for example, that someone is evil, wicked, a traitor or an enemy, or in which we say that an institution is unjust. Harman's claim is that inner judgments are relative to an agreement in a way in which other moral judgments are not. This agreement consists of an intention on the part of each person to adhere to some plan or set of principles on the understanding that others similarly intend. The truth of inner judgments is thus relative to the having of shared intentions. 'Basic moral agreements' provide an *objective standard* for determining our moral obligations. They also explain how this set of principles can motivate people to act. The principle suggestion about inner judgment is that we do not apply them to someone who does not share our moral understanding. We might regard intelligent aliens from outer space who cared nothing for human welfare, as dreadful enemies to be destroyed; but we would not say that they ought not to harm us; it is wrong of them to hurt us, etc. He also uses the example of the cannibals eating the sole survivor of a shipwreck. His main contention is the inappropriateness of blame in such cases.

Our point is that Harman's examples do not show what he wants to show. If Harman wants to show that the mere absence of an agreement entails the inappropriateness of inner judgments, he needs an example, in which we regard the agreement as permitting or requiring a really terrible practice – and are still reluctant to make inner judgments. Such a move will let us consider practices which we would condemn, not just 'for us', but for all people. Examples are slavery, the abuse of children, the torture of immigrants, etc. If Harman is right then judgments like "It is wrong of them to keep slaves or injure children with burning cigarette butts, etc." would sound odd. But they do not. We would make these judgments even in the face of the knowledge that their "basic moral agreement" allowed slavery or child-abusing because we think that such an agreement is deficient. They *ought* not to regard slavery and the abuse of children as morally acceptable. The reply may be that the slave-owning society does not know that what it does is unjust or wrong. It may be possible that the slave owner did not care to know or was too greedy or callous to make the connections between the motivating attitude and the action. He is open to the criticism that the person in question ought to have those motivating attitudes. The mere lack of motivating attitude does not make inner judgments inappropriate.

For moral relativism to be coherent, it has to be the case that it was *not wrong* of the agent to act in a certain way; not merely that he ought not to be *blamed*. Harman, it seems mistakenly identifies "it was wrong of X to do A" with "X's doing A was blameworthy."

What is important for our present purpose is that we do sometimes make inner judgments about people even when they are not parties to our "basic moral agreement" or do not share our moral understanding. Nor do we always withdraw

such judgments upon learning that they are ignorant; they do not know that it is wrong, or that they lack requisite motivational attitude. If we leave aside dealing with extra terrestrial creatures or members of an exotic culture and consider people who live in our society, for example, hardened criminals, then on Harman's claim, we cannot make inner judgments about them as long as they do not intend to adhere to the set of principles which constitute our basic moral agreement. Harman seems to propose that even if they had reasons not to kill or steal, these reasons fail to motivate them. Here too, one's very indifference to those reasons can itself be rationally criticizable.

The basic moral agreement may have implications of which one is not aware due to factual or logical error, or rationalization or self-deception. But how are we to know what is implied or required by the basic agreement? The answer is whether a practice coheres with it or not. A practice which cannot be reconciled with fundamental aspects of the shared moral understanding will have to be dropped – or the understanding would require drastic revision. Coherence then provides a kind of objective, external pressure on the interpretation of the basic moral agreement, and on the adoption or rejection of moral practice. From such an understanding, the lack of relevant motivational attitudes can be rationally criticized; those persons are committed to reasons they may not acknowledge.

Once this is seen, we can make inner judgments about hardened criminals, about Hitler, perhaps even about the aliens from outer space who care nothing for our welfare. Although we may agree with Harman about the aliens on the ground that their 'form of life' is so utterly different from ours that we are not very much perturbed about the fact that they are indifferent to our welfare, we cannot agree that

the hardened criminals who cares nothing for other people welfare have no reason not to harm us. The failure to care is itself the object of rational criticism. That our action hurts or causes sufferings is what gives us a reason to stop and that reason seems to be independent of how one feels about it. Hence, the motivational attitudes can themselves be the object of rational criticism.

Relativization of truth and rightness seems suspect on another ground. The very idea of a conceptual scheme on which this depends is believed to be indefensible by some philosophers, because the idea is unintelligible. Relativization of truth and rightness is also believed to involve socialization or even personalization of the basic notion of *rationality*, which in its turn leads to multiple problems: *cultural imperialism*, when one group considers its own convictions final and unassailable; *incommensurability*, when groups deny the possibility of cross-paradigm understanding and evaluation; and *irrationalism* and *anarchy* to which all this is believed to lead.

Relativism is often likely to lead or actually leads to moral complacency – a general unwillingness to accept that one’s moral opinions on what is right and wrong may be mistaken. In a given community, determined by social approval and disapproval - the social attitudes, all being beyond criticism, it is impossible to criticize something except according to one’s own cultural norms. Any criticism of the practices of another culture is also unwarranted and hence, the members of that culture is under no obligation to pay attention to it.

Relativism also makes impossible moral conversion. By moral conversion we mean transition from a less developed to a more developed moral consciousness. By “developed” we mean more critical. Because members of a community, as required

by relativism, strictly adhere to the moral codes of the community, moral conversion either implies rejection of the moral codes and to live by codes not available in their own community. We wonder if a relativistically structured society will provide for dissenters like Buddha or Christ. For persons belonging to the same society and culture, seeing things as one does, will depend on the commitments that determine their individual lives. A person's character, constituted in part, by the commitments that inform it determines his particular understanding of various values and the judgments he makes in response to such values. It is clear that the values at stake in an agent's judgments are moral values, values that create a conflict within the morality of a society. Such phenomena – which are not very uncommon, are difficult to square with relativism. Thus we see that moral relativism fails to give whole-hearted support to moral scepticism.

From the relativity of moral value it does not follow that every action is right according to some acceptable system. There are certain things, for example, holding first to a contradiction, ignoring the unimpeachable legal or experimental evidences, or exterminating a race, which are just wrong. Such convictions must be restricted. We cannot say in the name of relativism that anything goes. From the fact that several positions are right it does not follow that none is wrong. Relativists also claim that morality should not be abandoned. Relative moral judgments can continue to play a serious role in moral thinking.

We have already mentioned earlier that moral scepticism came to the forefront with the rise of meta-ethical thinking. Twentieth century's theories of the nature of morality have focused on an analysis of moral language. Philosophy of language has

changed since the established analyses were developed by emotivist's theories such as Stevenson's or prescriptivist theories advanced by Hare and his followers.

Neither Stevenson nor Hare could fully dispense with the cognitive element in our moral judgment. According to Stevenson, a moral judgment has two elements of meaning, descriptive and emotive. The descriptive meaning describes the speaker's approval or disapproval towards something. The emotive meaning of 'ought' and 'good' is a meaning that is emotionally charged enabling the speaker to express his or her attitudes and to change or intensify the attitudes of the audience. By making moral statements expression of attitudes, Stevenson does justice to the apparent irresolvability of moral disagreements by arguments. Some moral language users are mistaken in believing that moral arguments may be correct or incorrect. They also would be mistaken in the possibility of one becoming more mature in making moral judgments. Stevenson's analysis of moral disagreement, which is inconsistent with 'moral relativity', provides little explanation why moral language users could be so mistaken. Stevenson's account for irresolvable moral disagreement hangs heavily on assimilating approval to personal taste. Normally, however, we associate approval of something with maintaining that there are reasons for being favorably disposed towards that thing, and that it is implied that anyone in the same position ought to approve of it.²⁰ Approval is an attitude purporting to have an impersonal authority behind it. When one makes a moral statement, one implies that there are reasons for the pro-attitude expressed, reasons, which one believes ought to be accepted by anyone else in the same position. This has been recognized by J.O. Urmson in whose writings emotivism was adumbrated. He points out that one can say, "I approve of this, but may be it is not good." What one would mean is that the reasons one has for approval may be mistaken or outweighed by other considerations. Urmson concludes

that "This is good" means "It is correct to approve of this".²¹ Naturally, to be correct implies a standard of correctness. This suggests that parties to a disagreement must agree in adhering to some principle of correctness in spite of their oppositions in purposes, preferences, desires, and aspirations.

Ironically, the fact of ethical disagreement is itself a refutation of emotivism. Disagreement arises only because the question of truth or objective validity is involved. Were it merely a matter of differing attitudes, the question of one attitude being more true than another could not arise. My way of looking at things, is merely different from yours, and there the matter should rest. Nothing can be done about it. But the situation is not so simple; there is not merely difference but disagreement. It is not simply like one man's preferring movies and another person's liking theatre. It is rather - I feel that you are in the *wrong*, and I want you to see things in my way. The core of the dispute is not how I feel about it, but how the actuality of the situation is to be assessed. There is always the intractable claim to objectivity in all ethical judgments. This claim has not been satisfactorily explained in emotivism. It cannot be denied that the use of ethical language involves powerful emotions. Strong and persistent attitudes also are undoubtedly present making producing conviction a difficult task. The fact that we still engage ourselves in that task indicates that something more than emotions and attitudes are at stake. The role of emotions in the moral domain is controversial. Two central features of emotions are particularly problematic for the integration of emotions into the moral domain: (1) the nondeliberate nature of emotions, and (2) the partial nature of emotions. The nondeliberate nature has been claim to contradict the possibility of moral responsibility and the partial nature of emotions, a narrow and fragmentary perspective focused upon an emotional object, has been perceived to be incompatible

with the impartial nature of morality. Hence, the emotivist's emphasis on emotive uses of language is misconceived from the very start.

When we come to R.M. Hare, we find that he also does not purge the descriptive element from his prescriptivism. His distinction between phrastic and neustic brings out his incorporation of the descriptive element in a moral judgment. In a sentence, the phrastic refers to what is said or talked about. It is the propositional content. It is the common element between a statement, a command, an interrogation, or an expression of intention, etc. According to him, sentences can be dramatized in terms of phrastic and neustic. The neustic is the sign of mood; it shows how, in what manner, what is said, is said. It is by virtue of the phrastic-neustic that logical relations may hold between imperatives and indicatives, value judgments and statements of fact. This is because the logical words which govern any piece of reasoning "are best treated as part of the phrastics of sentences" and "this means that they are common grounds between indicatives and imperatives".²² He is against reducing moral sentences to descriptive statements of fact, and criticizes different reductionist attempts in *The Language of Morals*.²³ He is against the attempt to derive evaluative conclusions from purely factual premises. But, he also says that evaluative judgments are supervenient on statements of facts. The descriptive statements constitute the reason or criterion for calling something good or ought. Hare, thus, refuses to reduce moral statements to personal preferences.

One may be tempted to say that Hare's interpretation of ought statements is compatible with the moral phenomena that have motivated relativism. He interprets, "A ought to do X" statements in the following manner:

If A does not do X, A will be breaking a universal
'ought' principle to which I hereby subscribe.

We may imagine some disagreement which is irresolvable because the parties to the disagreement have subscribed to different universal 'ought' principles that require incompatible actions. Similarly, variations in moral beliefs across societies and different groups within a single society can be result of the choice of different universal 'ought' principles. The result is moral relativism. However, in his analysis of how, 'ought' and 'good' are used to prescribe and commend Hare explains how speakers are expressing and attempting to evoke *principled* pro and con attitudes towards an object, person or action. For instance, speakers of "A ought to do X" statements express a negative attitude toward "A not doing X" by subscribing to quasi-imperatives requiring X. Disapproval of A, not doing X, is a matter of having reasons based on universal principles. Hare is able to avoid the fusion between this attitude and personal taste that underlies Stevenson's analysis of moral judgments. The reasons for disapproval apply to any other action with the some relevant properties. For example, if we disapprove of someone's breaking a promise then any action similar to it in the relevant respect, that is, in the respect of breaking a promise, will also be disapproved by us. This is due to the logic of the word 'making a promise', the meaning rule governing its use in language. Hare is able to say that in making an "A ought to do X" statement, a speaker implies that anyone ought to have a negative attitude towards A not doing X, given the universal 'ought' principle to which the speaker subscribes. Since, Hare is prepared to assert that there is often wide

agreement on such principles within a society; he can claim that he does justice, at least, to some aspects of the view of morality as objective.

Hare does not admit of much significant moral relativity because he believes that our choice of 'ought' principles is severely constrained by the prescriptivity of moral language and the capacity of moral principles to be universalizable. Assenting to a moral judgment, he says, means assenting to the imperative derivable from it and to act upon it, when it is within the physical and psychological powers of the person concerned. Dissenting from the imperative means that he has not assented to the as a moral judgment, but has used it some other sense. If one subscribes to a moral principle, one must be ready to apply it to oneself as well as to others, and one must be willing to apply it in all sorts of hypothetical situations in which one finds oneself in the place of others. Hare even seems, at a later stage, to hold that "the fanatic too is a universalizer; he is only a defective universalizer".²⁴

We may argue from the above discussion that although Stevenson's emotivism may be said to be inclined towards relativism, and, therefore, scepticism, by falling back upon attitude and preferences, Hare cannot be so characterized. He holds that one's moral judgments apply universally, they apply consistently to everyone, so that relevantly similar cases are treated similarly. In this position, the exceptions to the judgments are permitted, but they are not beyond reasonable question. They need not be formulated in terms of general principles at all; they may be restricted only to particular prescriptions for particular cases. According to Hare, exceptions to principles of conduct do not make them loose. He proposes that the exceptions, when incorporated in the principles, make them more strict.

Universalizable inter-personal judgments and judgments of self are accepted by J.P. Sartre in *Existentialism and Humanism*. Human freedom is asserted by the arbitrary moral choice. Since, “Man is condemned to be free”, his choices are without, “any means of justification or excuse.”²⁵ But this does not undermine freedom as a bare thesis of universalizability.

In view of the above we find that non-cognitivism is not the sweeping sceptical view it may appear to be. Even when moral judgments are not true or false, but rather expressive, say, of pro or con attitudes or of commitments to norms, there may still be rational and indeed justified moral attitudes, say, those based on a balanced appraisal of the facts.

Non-cognitivism may even allow that so far as property of language goes, we may say of moral judgments “that is true” or “I know that his judgments on that matter is true”. Such a “statement” is neither an empirical nor an a priori truth or falsehood at all, as it would be for Kantian rationalism, utilitarian empiricism or intuitionism. But that alone does not entail a global moral scepticism. In part, because such normative notions as justifications and rationality can apply to non-truth-valued items, such as actions. If a moral judgment can be rational and can guide rational action, then at least global scepticism is mistaken.

Relativism, like scepticism, has been refuted a number of times and has surfaced again and again. MacIntyre²⁶ is of the opinion that scepticism and relativism are not susceptible of genuine refutation:

Our assent is or ought to accord only with a recognition that what they present is a moment in the development of thought, which has to be, if possible, transcended,

and this even though we may yet lack adequate grounds
for believing ourselves able to transcend them.²⁷

But we can't transcend a theory until we understand what can be said in its favor. MacIntyre argues that the contingent fact of the agent's situations makes it possible to have mutually incompatible sets of belief and between the sets of beliefs so structured that each has internal to it its own standards of truth and justification. They do not allow the possibility of having neutral or independent standards of rational justification to justify the choice of one set of beliefs rather than another. But, if a person who has the abilities to understand both the standpoints and both the cultures, must choose between 'X is right' and 'X is wrong', then if he is adequately reflective, he is bound to transform his understanding of truth and rational justification. So, rational choice transforms the imaginary person who is exposed to cultures other than his own.

No discussion of moral scepticism is complete without a discussion of Mackie's stand on the matter. His sceptical position is focused against moral realism. Mackie's objection to moral realism rests on the epistemological queerness of an implausible "faculty of moral intuition" for knowing moral facts. Against this charge of Mackie it may be pointed out that it is hard to figure out how we can know essences, causes, numbers, propositions, meanings and so on. Most philosophers do not deny entities of this sort; rather, they go on talking about them. Mackie says, "I can only state my belief that satisfactory accounts of most of these can be given in empirical terms."²⁸ He seems to reject other non-empirical facts along with moral facts. However, it remains to be seen whether investigations of these other areas will lead us to expand Mackie's list of ordinary ways of knowing. For our purpose, the

main point is that the epistemological considerations Mackie puts forth do not yield the ontological conclusion. Even if we do not have any epistemological access to moral facts that does not show they do not exist. Mackie's objection has two poles. He castigates intuitionistic epistemology as being "implausible", as being "out of favour" and resorting to it, as "a lame answer", and he rejects it as a means of knowing moral facts. Let us take up his criticism of moral intuition.

In the judgment of some writers on moral cognition intuitionism offers a moral epistemology "which is not implausible, as Mackie says, but perhaps is most promising". Such an approach to moral scepticism has been portrayed and defended by Robert Audi.²⁹ He offers a modified version of intuitionism, a version intended to improve on the one proposed by W.D. Ross in *The Right and the Good*.³⁰ Ross, we know, proposed a list of *prima facie* duties. In explaining how we apprehend the self evident, unprovable moral truths in question, Ross appealed to something that we commonly call intuitions. However, according to Audi, Ross does not always distinguish apprehending the truth of a proposition that is self-evident from apprehending its self-evidence. It is granted that moral agents have intuitive knowledge of their duties. But this does not mean that we, as moral agents, need intuitive knowledge of the epistemic status of the principle of duty. This point is significant because it seems to overlook a crucial distinction. Intuition can yield a kind of insight into non-inferential knowledge of first order moral propositions, the principle, for example, that promise keeping is a duty, without yielding such knowledge of first order moral propositions to any insight into second order propositions about these propositions, namely that the principle is self-evident. Audi moots the idea that intuitions can be conclusions formed through rational enquiry or searching reflection. In such an understanding of intuition we can have intuitive

justification for holding moral judgments and moral principles. Such reflectionism indicates how intuitionism can be freed from dogmatism (unreflective acceptance) and arbitrariness.

Intuitionism is held by some to be dogmatic because it claims both that we have intuitive, certain knowledge of what our *prima facie* duties are and that we cannot ground that knowledge on any kind of evidence. But Audi observes that not all intuitionists, including Ross are committed to our having ‘certain knowledge’ here - where such certainty implies indefeasible justification for moral propositions. Despite his analogy between moral principles and logical and mathematical principles, Ross gives a place to “reflective equilibrium” (to use John Rawls’ phrase) to enhance or override the justification for an intuitive moral judgment. He also speaks of a systematization of moral principles and such systematization might provide reasons for corrections of certain intuitions and intuitive moral judgments. As to the issue of arbitrariness, it has been pointed out that intuitionism requires that before one can be intuitively justified in accepting a moral proposition, one must have adequate understanding of the proposition; this often requires reflection. And intuitions yielded by reflection cannot be arbitrary. Reflection can correct deceptive intuitions, prejudice or whim which may pass for intuition.

Audi says, “There is no conclusive reason to think that Ross or other intuitionists are committed by their intuitionism to implausible epistemic principles”.³¹ Self-evidence for them does not mean non-evidential.

The defense of a reconstructed Rossean view in moral epistemology should be taken seriously. There is much to commend a fallibilist, intuitionistic, moral rationalism which uses reflection as a justificatory method, encompassing both

intuitions as *prima facie* justified inputs to ethical theorizing and reflective equilibrium as a means of extending and systematizing those inputs.

What we have said above will take care of Mackie's ontological scepticism which derives partly from his underestimation of intuitionistic epistemology and metaphysics.

May be we cannot believe in facts which we cannot know, but if so, for the same reason, we also should not believe that such fact do not exist, if we cannot know that they do not exist. Sinnott-Armstrong in his gloss on Mackie's ethical views says:

The only way to get from 'no knowledge' to 'no fact' is via a premise that we would be able to know moral facts if there were any. But Mackie gives us no reason to accept such a premise. So it seems reasonable to suspend belief until we find a better argument."³²

So far as the psychological queerness of moral epistemology is concerned, it is not clear what Mackie wants to say. Clearly, moral facts themselves cannot motivate the will. Question of motivation arises only when we have access to what is supposed to motivate us. On Mackie's own admission there are no moral facts to have access to on our part. It seems that our beliefs rather than facts that have the queer relationship to motivation. Supposing that moral facts are 'utterly different from other kinds of facts' in having the 'queer relationship to motivation', what is not clear is how does this difference in influencing power makes them suspect metaphysically. Let us explain with an example:

Magnets have a power of attraction that makes them different from anything else, but that does not lead us to

deny the existence of magnets. What we need is some reason to believe in magnets or moral facts. If we have these reasons, the uniqueness of their power hardly disproves their existence. We are also not quite satisfied with his claim that motivation follows ‘automatically’.³³

It is questionable whether moral beliefs are as closely related to motivation even in a realistic claim, to be automatic. If I am in a zoo and a tiger escapes from its cage it will influence my choice to immediately flee, but the relationship is not conceptually necessary. Not everyone perhaps will move from the path of the tiger. A person suffering from morbidity or death wish or having lost all jests for life might want to be attacked and eaten up by the tiger. Analogically, a not-to-be-doneness as per Mackie’s analysis is built into the moral belief that we ought not to be cheating on taxes. Yet there are people who seem not to care at all about cheating on their taxes even though, they believe that tax fraud is a wrong principle. So, it clearly goes against Mackie’s claim that everyone who believes that an act is immoral is at least somewhat motivated not to do it. It is not true that always and without fail moral beliefs are tied to motivation to act accordingly as conceived by Mackie. The relationship between moral beliefs and motivation does not hold unexceptionally. Hence, it fails to support his moral scepticism.

In his final kind queerness – metaphysical queerness, Mackie is raising the question of relationship between a natural fact, like causing a pain and a moral fact that causing pain is wrong. The relationship, he says, is mysterious. But the mystery of relationship cannot be an argument for giving up moral facts. It is indeed a hard question to answer. But there is no dearth of cases where it is a reason to doubt the

facts about them. For example, it is hard to say how biological facts differ from physics and psychology. This inability does not lead us to deny biological facts. Our inability to spell out relations amongst facts might be a reason to doubt those facts but it is hardly a reason to deny that those facts exist.

Besides, the relationship between moral facts and non-moral facts has been specified by moral philosophers as supervenience. That you ought to pay your tailor is supervenient on the fact that he made your dress on the understanding that you would pay him. That a picture is a good picture is supervenient on the non-evaluative fact that it has received the Lalita Kala Academy award. On the level of moral language, the supervenient relationship between evaluative words like 'good' and descriptive words was pointed out by R.M. Hare in the 50's of the last Century. He says, "... one of the, most characteristic features of value words is a feature sometimes described by saying that 'good' and other such words are the name of 'supervenient' or consequential properties."³⁴

Recent work on supervenience distinguishes several different relations. Defenders of moral facts do not all agree on which relation holds, but whatever be the relations, it has an answer to Mackie's question: "What in the world is signified by this 'because'?" Even if they can't justify their preference or explain why one relation holds rather than another, that is no reason to deny that moral facts exist and have some relationship to non-moral facts.

In rounding up our evaluation of Mackie's version of scepticism we may observe that Mackie might be right to suppose that no moral facts exist. He is wrong to suppose that moral realists are committed to their existence in the way in which Mackie thinks they do, that is, being "part of the furniture of the world". Mackie's

own position in his *Ethics* is no less queer. He believes that once we had recognized our error in moralizing we could continue to moralize, knowing that what we were doing was not discovering or reporting upon facts, but drawing out the implications of the rules we must devise for social harmony in a world of limited resources and parochial affections. One may wonder how one can or try for a harmonized social living on a systematic adherence to false beliefs.

Mackie's error theory is a *prima facie* descriptivist antirealist position. This position maintains both that there are no moral facts as well as that whether this combination of moral antirealism and descriptivism is plausible. Simon Blackburn thinks that this combination is inconsistent. He thinks that it is difficult to attribute a pervasive systematic error to our making moral judgments. As he puts it:

... the puzzle is why, in the light of the error, Mackie did not at least indicate how a shmoral vocabulary (that is, a moral vocabulary cleansed and purged of its ontological error) would look, and did not himself go on only to shmoralize, not to moralize.³⁵

To try to avoid a pervasive and systematic error should appear reasonable to those who were aware of it. But Mackie seemed:

... quite happy to go on to express a large number of straightforward moral views about the good life, about whether it is permissible to commit suicide or abortion, and so on (namely, to moralize rather than to shmoralize).³⁶

Let us turn to Mackie's understanding of moral scepticism on the strength of moral relativity. There are many ethicists like Gilbert Harman and Bernard Williams who have contributed to the debate on moral relativity, if not with the same intention of Mackie's. The question is whether moral codes and beliefs really do vary as much as Mackie made it out. We have already in the previous pages of this chapter discussed the tenability of moral relativity. We are not going to repeat them here. However, we intend to make certain additional points. While considering the argument from relativity we never deny that social conventions of politeness, deference and etiquette vary from society to society. These conventions which have become a practice with us are accepted unreflectively. They help smooth relations with others, make adjustment in our behavior and reduce tension in social situations.

In some cases social conventions having to do with marriage and family, position of woman and slaves, cruelty to animals, etc., are culture-specific. We are not also very much perturbed by the relativity of social practices because we feel that they spring from false beliefs; false assumptions having clouded moral intuitions. We aspire that the conflict will gradually diminish with greater awareness and education about the matter.

There is hardly any society which is a fully closed one. It is artificial to treat different cultures as absolutely airtight and self-contained systems. The ethical norms of a given culture can always stretch beyond its own boundary. Overcoming divergent ethical beliefs and practices can be brought to converge by independent enquiry and rational argument; this fact will not imply relativism. Each outlook may still be making claims it intends to apply to the whole world, not just to that part of the world which is its 'own' world.

There are very general moral principles which are recognized at least implicitly, to some extent, in all societies. Such general principles when assimilated with concrete different situations, different existing social patterns or different preferences will generate different specific moral codes. Specific moral rules may be regarded as the expression and manifestation of some very general moral principles.

In considering relativism we may take seriously features of our value experiences. Courage, courtesy, temperance, prudence, generosity, loyalty and justice are all sound virtues all the world over. Because, these qualities do have effects whether we notice them or not. Both virtues and vices like murder, adultery, truth-telling, promise keeping are in the same sense constitutive of morality. It is in the first place they which enable us to recognize a justification as a moral justification, and in the second, that a way of life as a morality has points of contact with other moralities. A similar point is made by David Hume in one of his dialogues. In that dialogue Hume emphasizes the similarities which are to be recognized:

[By] examining the first principles which each nation establishes. of blame and censure. The Rhine flows north, the Rhone south, but both spring from the same mountain ... In how many circumstances would an Athenian and a Frenchman of merit certainly resemble one another? Good sense, knowledge, wit, eloquence, humanity, fidelity, truth, justice, courage, temperance, constancy, dignity of mind. These you have all 'omitted'.³⁷

In today's world of media explosion and globalization moral relativity has been considerably weakened. Cosmopolitanism has been adopted by many. Many people have started to adopt and live on standards and models from another culture, those which they do not find in their own cultures. One example is unmarried motherhood. Living outside marriage, gay lifestyle, etc., are becoming acceptable in conservative cultures too. We are not judging the worthwhileness or otherwise of these trends. We want to bring home the fact that moral relativity is sufficiently weakened to be in a position to justify moral scepticism.

The moral sceptic have denied that morality has an objective foundation. There may be an answer from the moral objectivists. For the objectivist moral knowledge might be compared to mathematical knowledge. Our knowledge of mathematics is not based upon our observation of the empirical world but upon our understanding of mathematical concepts – our concepts of numbers, addition, subtraction and so on along with mathematical operations. Because we can understand such concepts and their operations, we can acquire mathematical knowledge. We can know, for example, that the square root of 5 is 25. Human beings may be unique in their ability to grasp mathematical concepts, but the facts of mathematics do not depend upon them. Even if we lacked the conceptual resources to understand it, it would still be true that the square root of 5 is 25. Similarly, the objectivist may hold that our knowledge of morality is based upon our understanding of moral concepts. Because we can understand such concepts, we can acquire moral knowledge. We can know, for example, that the brutal oppression of women is wrong or it is wrong to torture a kid for fun. Human beings may be unique in their ability to grasp moral concepts, but the facts of morality do not depend upon us. Morality, no more than mathematics, is not something that people invent. Even if people lacked the

conceptual resources to comprehend it, it would still be true that the brutal oppression of women is wrong and so is torturing a young child for fun. Facts of morality do not depend upon us – upon our subjective states or the conventions that us – upon our subjective states or established conventions. If there are, in this sense “objective” moral facts then moral objectivism is true.

Moral demands are not ‘parts of the fabric of the world’. Moral claims may be objectively correct or incorrect, but when one seeks a general explanation of what makes them so, that explanation does not run through the relation between those statements and the world, but rather through the relation between *accepting* those statements and practical reason. A moral demand would be inescapable in the required sense if it is one that a rational agent must accept if he is to be a rational agent. It is, to use one of Kant’s favorite metaphors, *self-addressed* by any rational agent. In acknowledging the categorical demand of obligation or recognizing a moral requirement, the kind of thing expressed in saying, for moral reasons, ‘I must’, or ‘I ought to’, one experiences an adequate sense of objectivity which has little to do with the demands being part of the fabric of the world. Whoever has an experience of objectivity in this sense will realize that Mackie has been looking for objectivity in the wrong place.

CHAPTER IV

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For a detailed discussion on the relationship between the notions of *objectivity* and *explicitness* see F. Mulhoyer, "Objectivity", *Erkenntnis*, 1988, pp. 185-230.
2. This point is articulated in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, "The subject does not belong to the world" (5.632). "The philosophical self is not the human being nor the human body, or the human soul with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world – not a part of it" (5.641). "There must be objects..." (2.206).
3. This point has been commented upon by philosophers such as, Nicholas Jardine, "Science, Ethics and Objectivity" in *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds., J. E. J. Altham and R. Harrison. Cambridge: CUP, 1995, pp. 32-45 and Christopher Hookway, "Fallibilism and Objectivity: Science and Ethics" in the same volume, pp. 46-67. Also, Louis Caruana, "Science and Ethics: Tracing Parallels and Contrasts between Science, Relativism and Utilitarianism" in *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2006.
4. Louis Caruana, "Science and Ethics: Tracing Parallels and Contrasts between Science, Relativism and Utilitarianism", *op. cit.*, pp. 122-23.
5. *Ibid*, pp. 123-124.

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27. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
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33. Example Courtesy Md. Ferdosh Islam, *Moral Realism: A Study in Moral Objectivity*, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Bengal, 2007.
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CHAPTER V

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In presenting this thesis my intention has been to offer some sort of clarification of the relation between morality and scepticism. I have been selective in focusing my attention on some major problems. Both the concepts of morality and scepticism are of ancient vaneer. Hence, an enormous amount of work has been done in the field. To avoid the risk of being lost in the profusion of literature and the myriad issues raised in them, I have to be selective. I begin with a historical introduction. This, of course, does not mean that I have included each and every aspect in the development of the problem in my discussion. A historical introduction is not without its merit. It puts the problem in a certain perspective and reveals the web of relationship in which a problem can be viewed and the direction toward which it may develop.

The debate on the sceptic's role in morality has been around ever since people began thinking critically about their moral convictions. The problem has always been to make sense of these convictions, in a way, that does justice to morality's apparent importance. How the sceptic is dealt with in ethics makes a significant difference to our understanding of what is valuable both in moral theorizing and moral practice.

The challenge of the sceptic creates a dismissive attitude toward the formation of the status of moral beliefs and the possibility of there being moral truths. The questions of moral epistemology lead into fundamental issues about the nature of morality, language, metaphysics and justification and knowledge in general. While traversing the path through these issues we have shown how moral scepticism has its peculiar characteristics although it belongs to the wider tradition of epistemological

scepticism. Despite the widespread use of current epistemic concepts and methodologies in moral epistemology, moral scepticism has a different flavor because of its link with human freedom and decision and regarding what we ought to do, what we ought not to do, what things we are to value, etc.

Sceptical attitude in morality has been maintained on different grounds. There are arguments from moral disagreement, moral relativism, subjectivism and analysis of moral language. These arguments have been stated and analyzed and they are found to be unsatisfactory and inadequate in capturing the essence of morality. If we make a moral judgment we believe that something really is right or wrong no matter what others may think. We also believe that other people can be mistaken in their moral judgments. These are certainly not resolvable solely with reference to moral relativism and moral disagreement. We have observed that most moral disagreements proceed in the absence of the relevant sorts of shared rock-bottom intuitions that could serve as a common basis from which to derive agreement. Yet the existence of persistent disagreement in ethics in itself is enough to sustain scepticism. We have seen that scepticism cannot seriously undermine moral knowledge, moral objectivity, justifiability of moral beliefs and moral realism. Our refutation of different sceptical arguments, however, does not mean that scepticism is ruled out. Scepticism is one of those doctrines that has by now been refuted a number of times too often. That it has been repeatedly refuted is a sure sign that this doctrine embodies some truths not to be neglected.

In the present context, we intend to make a stock-taking of the final outcome and to mention a few things which could not be taken up in course of the main exposition. One strategy of dealing with scepticism is that anti-sceptical philosophers

need to provide it a formulation in order to be able to argue against it. There are instances in which the moral sceptic's case has been presented by his opponents. Though Callicles and Thrasymachus are skeptics, it is unlikely that the lines that Plato placed in their mouths are remotely close to a sympathetic translation of anything they ever asserted; their role in the dialogues is to fall silent as Socrates makes his way to inevitable victory.

In whatever way the sceptical thesis is formulated – whether by those accepting the sceptical position, who formulate it and express reasons for accepting it in the form of a compelling argument or by the opponents who should know how best to express the sceptic's position – there is no dispute about one thing. It is that scepticism cannot be ignored. It has been defeated repeatedly and has raised its head again and again and needs to be defeated by the deployment of novel and ingenious arguments. This, in itself, should raise one's suspicion. The recurrence of moral scepticism and the fact that it cannot be defeated easily or be put to rest implies that there must exist significant considerations in its favor. Why moral scepticism deserves significant study is that it expresses widespread doubts about morality. One way of looking at it is that it would, if broadly adopted, have a pernicious influence on society. Paraphrasing Dostoevsky one might declare, "If there is no moral truth, then everything is permitted." Such rhetoric, however, does not withstand careful scrutiny. There are no grounds for assuming that the moral sceptic must be tolerant of those actions that would usually be opposed on moral grounds. Moral sceptics themselves often go to spend some efforts to stress the logical independence of first order and second order ethical views. The second-order moral views may leave one's first order practical commitments intact. David Copp has said "... the skeptic holds that no moral standard as such has an adequate and appropriate justification, yet she holds

that subscription to a moral value is an option even for a skeptic.”¹ Thomas Nagel says that most of the things we pursue are optional. “Their value to us depends on our individual aims, projects and concerns ... they acquire value only because of the interest we develop in them.”² Moral scepticism has moral significance because it can lead a person to view moral commitment as optional, in the way that we think that our commitment to daily outdoor exercise is optional. Most of us would concede that taking daily outdoor exercise is optional for a rational and informed person. People with appropriate desires, goals or attitudes may be rational to subscribe to them although other people would not be. But we or most of us would regard the standards that require daily outdoor exercise as lacking any objective basis or grounding. Analogously, the sceptic holds that no moral standard as such has an adequate and appropriate justification. We may even assume that the sceptic would have certain values. But such a person can value something without believing that some corresponding standard is justified.

The sceptic does not say that we cannot have beliefs. Indeed, we can have any number of them. The problem is, we are not in a position our beliefs. Moral scepticism seeks to undercut any attribution of positive epistemic status to an agent’s moral beliefs. Hence, the best way is to expose the arguments that have fueled and feed scepticism in morality. This we have tried to do. Yet, it is better to accept that though we do not fatally succumb to it, we never fully rid ourselves legitimate worries about the sceptic’s central claims. Any believer in moral knowledge, moral truth, moral reality must live in uneasy tension with the sceptic.

Have we given up too easily? Let us look at the sceptic's criticism once again. That there is no adequate evidence to support our moral views will have a curious consequence. This criticism, if successful, is sufficient to eliminate the justification we might have for any of our philosophical beliefs. If there is no adequate evidence to support our moral beliefs, then there is adequate evidence to support our philosophical beliefs. This principle forces a wholesale philosophical scepticism. So the price of moral scepticism is global philosophical scepticism. Yet, this is surely too high a price for moral sceptic's to pay, since they are affirming the warrant of at least one philosophical claim, namely, moral scepticism. This has been put succinctly by Russ Shafer Landau as:

... philosophical and moral claims are supported in similar ways, and enjoy the same general status. If we are prepared to be sceptical about moral claims, we must be equally sceptical about all philosophical claims. But that includes the specific philosophical recommendation to suspend judgement in the absence of determinative empirical evidence. It also includes moral anti realism proper, and all of the specific arguments offered on its behalf. That's hardly a secured basis from which to launch a critique either of moral realism, or of the possibility of its accommodating a plausible moral epistemology.³

One may question the coherence of the sceptical position itself. This position of the sceptic may be open to the charge of incoherence. If the sceptic uses an argument to prove his sceptical point, then he is using a means of knowledge which

he consistently cannot do. The argument he uses must itself be full proof, immune from the lack of justification. But this is incompatible with his own thesis that no moral standards are justified. Besides this theoretical incoherence, there is practical conflict, conflict between theory and practice. As Hegel puts it “It proclaims the nothingness of essential ethical principles, and makes those very truths the sinews of its own conduct.”⁴

Hence, the question may be raised whether the sceptic can live his scepticism. The question does not seem to be amenable to the same answer for both epistemological scepticism and moral scepticism. The most extreme sceptical position would be that said to be ideally taken by Pyrrho himself – namely, having no beliefs at all and refraining from acting in ways appropriate to the beliefs held by others. In other words, it consists in absolute suspension of both judgment and action. But that obviously untenable position can be modified, as it was by Sextus Empiricus, so as to allow action in accordance with appearances, while requiring total suspension of judgment. In his words, “we neither affirm nor deny ... but we yield to those things which move us emotionally and drive us compulsorily to assent.”⁵

The ancient sceptic always insisted that action need not be based on knowledge at all but “on the sufficiency of *non-cognitive* guides for action.” As Nicholas Rescher puts it:

... Sextus Empiricus insists time and again, the springs of actions are desire and aversion – seeking and avoiding – and this can operate without the intervention of any sort of credence, without our subscribing to a doctrine of any kind, or endorsing any actual thesis to

the effect that this or that *is really* the case ... Or again, a somewhat less radical strategy is available – one that countenances acceptance (and belief), but only on a wholly unreasoned basis (e.g., instinct, constraint by the appearances, etc.). The sceptic can accordingly hold – and act on – all those beliefs which people ordinarily adopt, with only this difference that he regards them as reflecting mere appearances...⁶

Such action, however, according to this position, implies no judgment regarding whether something really is the case. The standard objection to such a position, which as we saw in Chapter I, was expressed by Hume, who says that the sceptic cannot live such a scepticism. But contemporary discussions of scepticism provide a variety of responses to the question whether it is possible, or to what degree it is possible? Myles Burnyeat argues a minimalist position, claiming that the sceptic cannot live with no belief at all, because he at least has meta-beliefs about the justificatory statement between *P* and not-*P*.⁷ If we are to understand Burnyeat correctly then the sceptic lives by appearances only. And appearances are not beliefs because it does not suggest any link with appearing and claiming anything about what is really the case.

Terence Penelhum goes further and suggests two things. First, he says that acting according to appearances is the mild belief that *P* seems to be true or involves an inclination to believe that *P*.⁸ Second, he argues that appearances are motives for action.⁹ He writes:

To permit activity, the appearances, or on our analysis the mild beliefs, have to be seen as sources of action which would otherwise not get chosen and done; to offer the appearances in answer to the criticism that skepticism does not allow action is to concede that otherwise action would not take place, which is to admit that suspense of judgment would otherwise freeze us into immobility.¹⁰

From Penelhum's arguments we may conclude that the sceptic cannot both say that we are able to admit that things appear to be thus and so, yet be wholly without commitment on whether or not they are. To admit that they seem to be thus and so to him is to say that he has a mild degree of belief that they are.

The moral sceptic cannot live his scepticism in this way, because the moral sceptic cannot occasionally come out of his study to the "market place". We borrow the expression "market-place" from Penelhum. It means the social area where we are meeting other people and having interaction with them. The moral sceptic most of the time lives in the "market-place". To make sense of his scepticism he has to presume that there are moral communities, with individuals engaged in various sorts of reflections, and different levels of communications, as members. We participate in various social institutions - clubs, committees, associations, organizations and

ultimately the state. Morality is a system of rules, to be precise, norms. There are other systems of rules, like etiquette and law. But nobody denies, we think, that morality and etiquette or law play very different roles in our lives. We become involved in various rules and relations governed by rules. How are we to account for it? One may suggest that we teach morality with greater stringency than we teach etiquette or codes of law. But it invites the further question - why do we teach morality with stringency? It is because the concerns underlying morality is very widespread among people. And the moral sceptics who would lack all such concerns would be alien to us in fundamental respects. To put into application his sceptical doubt and to pursue his doubt he has to presuppose a lot. Unlike the epistemological sceptic he has to be constantly in relationship, he remains committed to commonsense. He often lapses from his meta-ethical position, from the theoretical commitment to living with others. Living with others prevents a person from becoming indifferent to the shape of his own life and those of others; rather it involves the capability of prudence or self-discipline, intimacy or self-denial. Such a person would feel regret and resentment, would resolve or reproach, feel ashamed, inspired or disillusioned. All of these pre-suppose the existence of experience that we think is characteristically human. They are revelatory of human aspirations or ideals of man. We are not claiming that everyone is committed to some ideal of life but few people genuinely lack it. What underlies morality is the commitment to some ideal of the person. Moral rules are the rules of conduct which it is rational to abide by if one prizes some ideal of life. Of course, it can be hard to determine which rules it is rational to abide by if one prizes a particular ideal. But these difficulties do not constitute a ground for general scepticism about morality. There is a difference between the truism that it is sometimes hard to know what morality requires and the

sceptic's radical claim. But this does not amount to the radical claim that either there is nothing to know in this connection, or that it is at least impossible to acquire such knowledge. Reasonable doubt is welcome but absolute scepticism defeats its purpose.

Man's moral practice does not cohere with the sceptical doubt. Living with others is not possible without pursuing different rules. Human nature is such that it forces us to believe, often without rational justification, but not unreasonably. If pressed, we can always offer the justification. To morally act is to act from some principles. The principles may not always be apparent to us or adequately formulated. However dimly seen or defectively formulated, some principles are there which function as the justification. So, the sceptic's charge that our morality is without justification does not carry weight. The inescapability of the demands of morality, what morality requires of me in particular here-and-now actual situations loosens the sceptic's grip on me because I am not interested in generalizations like 'everyone ought to promote the general happiness'. This is the discovery of general principles is the task of the moral philosophers. But the discovery of what *I* must do to promote the general happiness is not the job of moral philosophy: it is my own job as a moral agent. The sceptic can attack the ethical generalizations. It cannot touch the moral actor. An individual as knowing what morality requires him to do, but who at the same time has no reason to do it, has no place in the world of rational beings. A person will have acquired knowledge of what he ought to do only if he already cares about moral ends. And if he already cares about moral ends, he will inescapably now have a reason for doing what he knows he ought to do. It may, of course be, possible that a person should discover what he ought to do and thereupon cease to care about the ends of morality. But as soon as he ceases to care about the ends of morality he forgets what it is that he ought to do. Moral knowledge and the possibility of its

justification becomes suspect when we drive a wedge between intellect and will; between a person's knowing what morality requires of him and his having no reason for doing it. The demands of morality that moral judgments have a special kind of necessity; that they tell us what we "must do" or "have to do", whatever our interests or desires, is ignored by the moral sceptic. To explain away the inescapability of morals as the 'training' or 'conditioning' or as the result of our 'being brought up to feel ourselves under the necessity of moral inescapability' will amount to endowing the moral "ought" with a "magic force". Since, there is of course, no magic force, the sceptic's stand is unacceptable. Morality is binding only upon those who care about certain things; there are many who do care about these things. A person who cares nothing for the ends of morality need have no reason for doing what he knew he ought to do.

However, moral scepticism is not without its value. Its crusade against one true system of morality as sacrosanct paves the way for alternative moral standards. It empowers moral philosophers to critically evaluate moral theories and thus provide for openness and freedom of thought against archaic moral thinking. In this sense the moral sceptic does not make us believe that there is "no reason to be moral"; but rather that there is "no reason to be moral on one particular basis". It has been charged that moral scepticism is a move from completely shutting out archaic moral norms to some kind of universal scepticism that there may be no talk of roles, codes and standards in morality as such. The point is that if this be true, any talk of roles, codes, standards which moral sceptics themselves referred to should be impossible and thus global scepticism will defeat its own case. It will relative itself to culture, communities and societies. However, such critics may be told that a moral sceptic does never attempt shutting out completely all norms, roles, codes etc. What moral

scepticism tries to shut off is the possibility of having an overarching norm as universal that is applicable without exception. Many moral theorizing and activism in our times would not be treated as objects of moral consideration if we emphasize one absolute exceptionless standard of morality.

Scepticism challenges, in philosophical and socio-political terms, an absolute one-dimensional conception of the world, that is, a world without alternatives. It questions the hegemonic status that has often been claimed for this conception on the pretext that it is conducive to global peace, stability and development. It questions, for instance, why one basic notion, say justice, entertained in one world-view or ideology of a particular society – Western liberal democracy – should be erected as a universal standard to be imposed on all other societies. Can Rawls' principles of justice, for example, the relativist may ask, be globalized and effectively applied in societies which are not as affluent as his own, in non-western developing countries where hunger poverty, social injustice are prime practical concerns? A plethora of other concepts relating to moral and social problems may call for contextualization in a similar manner. Should one defend an absolute conception of the worth of life, for example, or should it be relativized? What impact will this relativization leave on policies pertaining to legitimation of suicide, abortion, euthanasia, ecology?

There are also movements such as feminism, rights of the black, lesbianism etc. The assumptions and constructions in understanding such world-views within the parameter of an absolute morality would distort the actual social positions and relations. It will mean exclusion of themes and topics from the scope of a disinterested monolithic moral theory. It requires a critical examination of the philosophical tradition and discipline, and by such attempts constructing new ethics.

Normative standards of practice will require self-reflexive strategies of criticism that are historically informed and politically sensitive. They will endorse social and institutional relations that support critical strategies. These will be produced by communities, sustained communally because the communities are provoked into thinking seriously about the phenomena mentioned above. There are doubts as to how much responsive attention the recent thought patterns and practices within communities will have from universally applicable moral norms. To coming to make sense of such “deviant” outlooks namely that the world may not be the way we want it to be implies challenging and changing dogmas of morality nurtured by society. These issues and more, have enormous relevance for our moral and social image of the world. And here the moral scepticism has its application because it has a value of making ethics more functional, more dynamic than treating it as a handmaiden of ethical engineering. Truly the value of moral scepticism cannot be ignored. We would do it better not to shut out the dissident voice of the sceptic but look to it as critical companion in our sojourn in the search of knowledge, truth and objectivity.

CHAPTER V

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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