

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

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. R.M. Chisholm, *Perceiving : A Philosophical Study*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1957.
_____, *Theory of Knowledge*, second edition, Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, New Delhi, 1977.
_____, *Theory of Knowledge*, third edition, Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, New Delhi, 1992.
2. Arvin Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XIV, No. 12, 1967, p. 359.
3. R.J. Hankinson, *The Sceptics: The Arguments of the Philosophers*. Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p. 267.
4. Marcus Singer, "Moral Skepticism", in *Skepticism and Moral Principles*, ed. C.L. Carter, Evanston: New University Press, 1973, pp. 79-83. Also, Marcus Singer, *Generalization in Ethics*, New York: Atheneum, 1971, pp. 7-8.
5. J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, New York: Penguin Books, 1997 edn.
6. J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, *op. cit.*, p.16.
7. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons, eds., "Moral Skepticism and Justification" in *Moral Knowledge?*, New York, Oxford: OUP, 1996.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

9. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr., H.J. Patton, B.I. Publications, 1949, p. 24. Also in Lewis White Beck, tr., *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and What is Enlightenment?*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959, p. 23.
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Genealogy of Morals*, trans., Francies Golffin, New York: Doubleday Com., 1956. Relevant are his other writings, particularly, *The Will to Power*. Trans., Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Random House, 1967 and *The Gay Science*, trans., Walter Kaufmann, New York: Random House, 1974.
11. Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Cambridge: Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985 and Phillipa Foot, "Nietzsche: The Revolution of Values" in Robert Solomon, ed., *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973.
12. G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: CUP, 1956.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111, emphasis Moore's.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
15. G.E. Moore, Preface to *Principia Ethica*, *op. cit.*, p. x., Parenthesis ours emphasis Moore's.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
19. R.M. Hare, *Essays on the Moral Concepts*, London: Macmillan, 1972, p. 45.
20. Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethics*, Vols. I & II, trans., Stanton Coit, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1950, pp. 218-223.

21. E.H. Cadwallader, *Searchlight on Values: Nicolai Hartmann's Twentieth-Century Value Platonism*, Lanham: University Press of America, 1984, p.42.
22. E.H. Cadwallader and Eisenberg, P.D., "Platonism-*Proper* vs. *Property*-Platonism: On Moore and Hartmann," *Idealistic Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January, 1975.
23. G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
24. Russ Shaffer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defense*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003, p. 56.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
26. S.A. Shaida, "Moral Scepticism" in *On Scepticism*, ed., Kalyankumar Bagchi, Visva-Bharati, 1989, p. 20.
27. *Ibid.*
28. David Copp, "Moral Skepticism". *Philosophical Studies*, 1991, p. 216-217.
29. *Ibid.* p.217.
30. An Abstract of a Book lately Published: Entitled *A Treatise of Human Nature*. &C. Wherein the Chief Arguments of that Book is further Illustrated and Explained (first published 1740). Cited from the Clarendon Edition of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007, Abstract 27.
31. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L.A. Selby-Bigge. ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007, p. 212.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 180-187.
33. *Ibid.*, 1.42.12.
34. *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955, 12.5.

35. *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 2nd edn., ed. by David Fate Norton, and Jacqueline Taylor, 1993, p.212.
36. *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.2. *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 12.2.
37. *Treatise*, pp. 212 – 213.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Abstract*, p.14.
41. *Treatise*, 183.
42. *Treatise*, 1.4.1.
43. A.J. Ayer, *Hume*, Oxford: OUP, 1980, p.70.
44. David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*(1751), ed., by L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford: OUP, 1975, p.169.
45. *Ibid*, p.173.
46. *Ibid*, p. 289.
47. Bertrand Russell, "Is There an Absolute Good?", *Russell on Ethics*, ed., Charles Pigden, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 112.
48. Bertrand Russell, "Reply to Criticisms", *Ibid.*, p. 149.
49. Bertrand Russell, "Is There An Absolute Good?", *op. cit.*, p. 165.