

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 watertight. 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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