

CHAPTER IV

CONSIDERATION OF THE GROUNDS OF MORAL SCEPTICISM

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

I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He also says:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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

6. Nicholas Jardín, "Science, Ethics and Objectivity" in *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds., J. E. J. Altham and R. Harrison, *op. cit.*
7. Louis Caruana, "Science and Ethics: Tracing Parallels and Contrasts between Science, Relativism and Utilitarianism", *op. cit.*, p. 125.
8. *Ibid.* , pp. 125-126.
9. *Ibid*, pp. 127-128.
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11. *Ibid*, p. 152.
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24. R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, Oxford: OUP, 1963, p.38.
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26. A. MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power and Philosophy" in *Relativism. Interpretation and Confrontation*, ed., Michel Krauz, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, *Ibid.*, p. 180.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
28. J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin Books, 1977, p. 39.
29. Robert Audi, "Moral Knowledge and Ethical Pluralism" in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, eds. J. Greco and E. Sosa, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, pp. 271-302. Also, his "Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundation of Ethics" in *Moral Knowledge?* eds., Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons, Oxford: OUP, 1996, pp. 101-136.
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31. Robert Audi, "Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundation of Ethics" in *Moral Knowledge?* eds. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
32. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, New York: OUP, 2006, p. 246.

33. Example Courtesy Md. Ferdosh Islam, *Moral Realism: A Study in Moral Objectivity*, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Bengal, 2007.
34. R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, *op. cit*, p.80.
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