

CHAPTER V

CONCLUDING REMARKS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Russ Shafer Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2003, p. 237.
4. Source, J.N. Mohanty, Foreword to *Absolute Skepticism: Eastern and Western*, Bhaswati Bhattacharya (Chakraborty), Calcutta, Prajña, 1987.
5. Sextus Empericus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Bk. I, Chapter 20, Sec. 193.
6. Nicholas Rescher, *Scepticism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, p. 216.
7. Myles Burnyeat, "Can the Skeptic Live his Skepticism?" in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed., Myles Burnyeat, Berkeley, 1983.
8. Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism*, Dordrecht, 1983, p. 42.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 54.