

CHAPTER II

THE STATUS OF MORAL VALUE:

NATURALISM

Modern Western ethics is interpreted as being concerned with certain questions which were not considered in past. Ethics was primarily a normative discipline. Its task was supposed to be the discovery of a moral standard by reference to which the moral value of human conduct is judged. Even philosophers of the 19th Century believed this. But today we find that, what these philosophers did in the name of finding an ethical standard was to deal with certain questions which are now believed to be main question of ethical philosophy. For example: ethics today is concerned with questions of the following kinds. It is believed that ethics of the recent past were also concerned with similar question although they might have been only superficially aware of them.

The questions may be put in the following way:

- (i) What is the difference between fact and value? Or Is there really any difference between fact and value? What is the relation between fact and value?
- (ii) If there is a relation between fact and value then an ethical judgement may be derived from a factual judgement. Is such derivation really possible?
- (iii) There is a question of meaning – the question is whether ethical and value terms have a factual meaning?
- (iv) There is a question of justification. The question is, whether a moral judgement is justifiable or not?

The above questions are not isolated or unrelated. An affirmative answer to the one would provide an affirmative answer to the other.

To the above four questions we should add a fifth one. This question is an epistemic interest. The question is whether moral value is cognizable or not. There are philosophers who believed that goodness or moral value is an object of proposition. There are others who would say that moral value cannot be cognized. These epistemological questions are of great importance. But no answer to these epistemic questions can be given independent of an answer to the questions of the ontological status of moral value. If one believes that moral value or goodness is objective or real prosperity characterising human, conduct, then moral value would be something describable as object of knowledge or cognition. The realists, objectivists, the naturalist, the intuitionist – all share the same idea, viz, moral value has an objective being which means that moral value is cognizable.

There are philosophers in the field of ethics who deny that moral value has an objective status. They would say that what we describe as good is the expression of our emotion or attitude. Consequently, there is no reason to believe that moral value is cognizable. In this way, the epistemic theories of cognitivism or non-cognitivism emerge as a consequence of the philosophers' discussion regarding the ontology of value.

The above discussion shows that it is necessary fact of all to consider the ontology of values before we settle the question whether they are cognized or not. So naturally it will take us actually too far, since the relation between moral ontology and moral epistemology is closely connected.

As we have already remarked the fact- value distinction has its classical root in the philosopher David Hume. Hume is said to be responsible for making an absolute demarcation between two and this led him to discover the basis of moral value in our feeling or sentiment. This Humean dichotomy, as we have already remarked, is not

admitted by such philosophers as Mill and Bentham for whom goodness has an objective or factual bases and this resulted in a different answer to the question of meaning, justification and cognizability with respect to moral judgement and moral value. Since our central concern is to decide between the rival claims of cognitivism and non-cognitivism. We shall go through the problems of meaning, justification and cognizability making reference to major ethical thought expressed in Naturalism, Intuitionism, Emotivism and other schools of ethical philosophy.

Cognitivism as we have already said is a theory which believes in the cognizability of moral value. Cognitivism is connected with ontological thesis namely naturalism and Intuitionism. We shall consider the central contention of these theories with an eye to what they say regarding the problem of meaning and the problem of justification. Let us begin with naturalism.

Naturalism is the thesis that the moral value can be identified with the natural property. Hedonism, for example, is a variety of naturalism which says that goodness can be identified with pleasure. Utilitarianism identifies goodness with utility of greatest happiness. Pleasure and utility are both supposed to be natural properties and consequently these two ethical theories have come to be known as Naturalism.

We are not going to give a detailed account of naturalism as advocated by Mill and Bentham. What is important in the present enquiry is that for the Naturalist value is a kind of fact or value is a natural thing like pleasure and utility. What we call value property is really a natural property. This being the position of Naturalist, it would be interesting to see how they deal with the problem of meaning of value terms and the problem of justification of moral judgement.

Since the Naturalists believe that an ethical property has moral value it is identifiable or identified with a natural property. It is observed by Hume- “All resembling impressions are created together and no sooner one arises than the rest immediately follow. Grief and disappointment gives rise to anger, anger to envy, envy to malice and malice to grief again, till the whole cycle be completed. In the like manner, our temper, when elevated with joy, naturally throws itself into love, generosity, pity, courage and other resembling affections.”⁵ It is possible to define an ethical term by factual terms. As a matter of fact when the Hedonists say that good is pleasure, they define the ethical term merely ‘good’ by the factual term merely ‘pleasure’. It means that for the naturalist value terms have factual meaning.

Regarding ethical judgements the Naturalist would say that what is ordinarily called value judgement is really an assertion of some kind of fact. Ethical judgements are virtually factual judgements. This identification has a very important implication. It means that a value judgement is an empirical judgement and as such it can be empirically verified. If the word ‘good’ means that which is desired by us or that which is pleasurable, then we can show empirically that something is good by showing that it is, in fact, pleasurable or that it is, in fact, desired by people. It means simply that the presence of value property can be proved by empirical tests.

In other words, a moral judgement is capable of empirical verification. This means that the naturalist say regarding the problem of justification that a value judgement can be justified empirically and proved to be either true or false.

For the naturalist, therefore, there is a relation between fact and value i.e. between a factual and a value judgement. The relations are such that given a factual judgement it is possible to derive a value judgement. Since value can be defined in terms

of fact, we can define 'ought' in terms of 'is'. It is not only a question of definition or a question of reducing 'ought' to 'is'. It is said that there is a relation of entailment, between a factual and a value judgement.

In the background of these ideas cognitivism appears on the philosophical scene. If value is definable in factual term or reducible to fact, it makes possible the derivation of 'ought' from 'is', then moral value must be as much an object of cognition as a fact. We can cognize moral value, since value is expressible as something to be the case. Cognitivism believes that one can have moral knowledge.

They believe in the second place, that a moral judgement may be known to be true or false by explaining the verification principle by which the truth value of a factual judgement is ascertained.

It is not necessary that a cognitivist should regard goodness or moral value as a natural property or identifiable with the help of a natural property. What is clear is that if good is identified with a natural property it can be known with a moral cognitive faculty.

Intuitivism is a theory which believes in the cognizability of value opposing at the same time the thesis that moral value has a natural property.

References:

1. David Hume: *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Cambridge, 1748, pp.23-34

L.A. Selby-Bigge (Ed): *David Hume: Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford, 1888, p.459

2. David Hume: *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Cambridge, 1748, pp.23-34
3. *Ibid*, pp.28-29
4. P.S. Ardal: *Passion and Values in Hume's Treatise*, Edinburg, 1964, p.31.
5. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Ed): *David Hume: Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford, 1888, p.283.
6. John P. Wright: *Hume's Treatise of Human Nature: An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.92.