

# CHAPTER I

## Moral Realism

### Introduction

Moral realism is the view that there are moral facts and true moral propositions. Moral realism is committed to moral facts and truths that are objective. It is the theory that moral judgements enjoy special sort of objectivity; such judgements, when true, are independent of what any human being think of them. The basic contentions of moral realism are in consonance with the general theory of realism. According to realism, everything exists, and objects of the world are in some way mind-independent or independent of human thought. As such realism is contrasted with idealism. Idealist theories claim that facts about the world are constituted by the ideas, images and perceptions of the human mind or facts about the human or Divine will. In the face of these idealist and theistic theories, we might try to characterize realism by defining it simply as the claim that there are mind-independent facts of certain kinds.

Realism offers a certain picture of our relationship to the world which is intuitively appealing. The world consists of objects whose existence, character and relations are fixed independently of what we happen to say, believe or desire. We, in turn, respond to the world by forming beliefs and making statements about it. These beliefs and statements are in this way assertoric; they make claims about the world, saying that things are this way or that. Since beliefs are in this way assertoric, each is true or false. Truth involves a certain kind of fit or match between the beliefs and features of the world. The question is: Does our belief and the statement expressing the

belief gets the world right? If it does and things are as the belief or statement asserts them to be then the belief or statement is true. Otherwise, it is false. So truth is conceived as the correspondence between belief/statement with a mind-independent world, while failure is failure of correspondence. This picture of our relationship with the world is attractive. It has been observed that this picture was so much a part of philosophizing in the ancient, medieval and early modern periods that it did not occur to philosophers to give it a name. The picture gets a label only after philosophers began to raise questions about it. The name given to the picture is realism. There are varieties of realism depending on the nature of the area of dispute one is involved in. For example, in philosophy of science, we have scientific realists, in theory of perception, realists about material objects, in philosophy of mind, the realists about the mental and in ethics the moral realists. There is a common pattern at work in this debate, a pattern that justifies the use of the term 'realism' in conjunction with all of them.

But what do we understand by mind-independence? What kind of independence is involved in this claim? Independence may be understood as causal independence. It may also be understood as conceptual or metaphysical independence. Which sort of independence is involved here? It cannot be causal independence because realists about artifacts will admit that the existence of things like chair, table, etc., is causally dependent on their creator's mental states, such as beliefs and desires. So by independence the realist does not mean causal independence. He must be asserting a different kind of independence. The facts about the world are not constituted by the mind. That is, realism claims that there are facts of a certain kind which are metaphysically or conceptually independent of the beliefs or propositions which are our evidence that these facts obtain. This central claim of realism allows us to contrast it

with familiar forms of anti-realism - nihilism or idealism or constructivism. Nihilism about a certain subject matter denies the existence of facts of a certain kind but these facts are constituted by some function of the evidence (i.e., the beliefs that are our evidence) for them. Nihilists, in moral matters, e.g., Frederick Nietzsche<sup>1</sup> argues that there are no moral facts and morality, as it existed, must be rejected. This brings us to another distinction - the distinction in the semantic thesis of the realist and that of the constructivist. However, by 'semantic' in this context we do not mean theories of meaning or language-understanding. The semantic thesis we take to imply theories of truth. Because realism holds that the facts are evidence-independent, and since truth is some sort of correspondence with fact, it will hold truth to be evidence-independence. We may represent realism as making two important metaphysical claims:

A. 1. There are facts or truths of a certain kind.

A. 2. These facts or truths are independent of the evidence for them.

Both Realism and Constructivism affirm A.1., and Constructivism denies A. 2.

B. 1. There are facts or truths of a certain kind.

B. 2. These facts or truths are constituted by the evidence for them.

Here, Constructivism affirms B.1 and Realism denies B.2.

There are moral philosophers who show unmistakable signs of adopting a moral realist's position. G. E. Moore<sup>2</sup> and Nicolai Hartmann<sup>3</sup> are two philosophers to whom we are indebted for the classical statement of what we call moral realism today. Moore's ethical non-naturalism has been an impetus to vindicate the objectivity of ethics in the light of metaphysical and epistemological principles, concepts and theories that started developing since then in post-Moorean Anglo-American philosophy. In this

sense, Moore and, Hartmann in the continent, are precursors of what is known as moral realism in contemporary philosophy.

There are many versions and manifold varieties of moral realism. No single description will neatly fit all those theories that have taken the label. It is not any unitary view, must be defined by disjunction, and this is a topic or set of topics in itself. Moral realism represents such diverse views that an initial characterization seems difficult. Claims of moral realism covers dimensions such as (1) cognitivism – Do moral judgments give us knowledge? (2) theories of truth – Do moral judgements have truth values, if so, in what sense? (3) reductionism – Are moral properties reducible to natural properties or do they supervene on some natural properties?(4) In what sense are moral judgements, if at all, objective? (5) Does the truth of moral judgements depend upon social-cultural norms? And so on. Answering some of these questions is the task I set myself to in the present context.

However, there is, we may say, a family resemblance, in the different claims made by moral realism. At the simplest level, all moral realists endorse the idea that there is a moral reality that people are trying to represent when they issue moral judgements about what is right and wrong. The disagreements that arise among realists primarily have to do with the nature of this reality. Sometimes, it is represented as the fact of human nature itself and its propensities. This is predominantly the view of the Renaissance philosophers like Hobbes and the British moralists in eighteenth century England. In contemporary moral philosophy, modern concepts from syntax and semantics have invaded the discussions on moral realism. Moral notions have received technical meanings and elucidations. Yet there is much ground of convergence.

The views about the reality of a given domain are divided into three large types.

(i) The moral nihilists reject the moral reality. Nothing really is right or wrong; these are terms which do not refer to anything at all. (ii) Constructivists endorse the reality of a domain but explain this by invoking a constructive function out of which the reality is constructed. Moral reality is the outcome of this function. What is common to all constructivists is the idea that moral reality is constituted by the attitudes, actions, responses and outlooks of persons possibly under idealist conditions. For the Kantian constructivists, there is no moral reality - no genuine moral obligations or any justified moral claims - if there is no such thing as pure practical reason. (iii) Moral Realism endorses the reality of a domain and as such is contrasted with constructivism. However, its claim that moral properties or relations are mind-independent has not been wholly accepted. For, moral assessment of an action or determining the moral status of it cannot be independent of the motivations, intentions, etc., of the moral agent. Minus all agents there would be no moral facts. So the moral realist's position is characterized by some, not by reference to mind-independence but "by reference to its endorsement of the stance-independence of moral reality."<sup>4</sup> It has been further observed that "Realists believe that there are moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective, in the sense that *the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective*. That a person takes a particular attitude towards a putative moral standard is not what makes the standard correct."<sup>5</sup>

We may now try to formulate the thesis of moral realism as an ontological thesis. The core thesis of moral realism as an ontological theory is that there are moral facts or truths and these facts or truths are independent of any 'preferred perspective'

that the moral agent might adopt. This core thesis we call MR henceforth. MR states the necessary condition of moral realism. But it does not state the sufficient condition due to the fact that there are certain meta-ethical views which are anti-realist but satisfy MR. But in spite of this difficulty before us, we cannot identify any further condition to add to MR. So, to exclude those views, whatever extra condition we may bring in will be *ad hoc* in some way or other. Therefore, we shall treat MR as a fairly clear core element of moral realism, because it leaves out the anti-realist theories in ethics. The opponents of moral realism are of two main kinds:

MR 1. Nihilists, emotivists, prescriptivists and other non-cognitivists deny that there are moral facts or truths.

MR 2. Ethical idealists who are cognitivists because they recognize the existence of moral facts and true moral propositions but claim that the moral facts are constituted by some function of our moral beliefs.

The moral non-cognitivists deny MR 2 and idealists and moral constructivists deny MR 1.

Since MR is stated as the core element in moral realism we may now state the basic elements of it.

- (1) There are moral facts or truths.
- (2) There are true moral assertions.
- (3) Moral knowledge is possible.
- (4) There is justification of moral claims.

(1) The question of there being moral facts or truths is the central thesis of moral realism. It is also one which is the most difficult to explain and obstructive of understanding. What are we to understand by moral facts? It is not there something

queer about talking of moral facts? It is true that moral facts are not hard or brute facts like chairs or tables or even like electrons or quarks. To speak of moral facts is to speak of what is good or right to *do* or to have done, or what is good to seek or to have been. It is really absurd to think of moral facts as things or entities existing in space and time like a table or a stone. Talk of existence does not get a foothold here. There is something straightforwardly misleading about saying that moral judgments like "Abortion is morally wrong" describe facts as do sentences like "The cat is on the mat." When normal speakers assert that abortion is morally wrong, they do not see themselves as stating a fact about abortion. They are trying to assess abortion by attributing a property to it. The nature of their claim is shown (or suggested) by the ways in which they argue about abortion, press their views on opponents, and often commit their lives to a moral cause. All these put together is supposed to fit better with the view that commonsense-language speakers are committed to moral facts and properties. More generally, moral facts include facts that something is morally wrong or morally obligatory, morally ought or ought not to do done, has a moral virtue or vice, or is morally good or bad, right or wrong as well as every fact that entails any of these moral facts. If there are positive moral facts we are also committed to the existence of negative moral facts or properties. For example, when someone says, "Abortion is not wrong" the negative fact that abortion is not wrong is postulated. In the same vein we can speak of negative moral properties, such as the property of being not morally wrong. We can speak of moral facts as something that is to be brought into existence, disposing the subject having the motivation to bring it about. There are genuine features of the world that remain forever outside the purview of empirical verification. Moral facts are such features. They introduce an element of normativity

which cannot be captured in the laboratories of the natural sciences. The commitment to moral facts has not gone unchallenged. There have been attempts to reduce moral facts to psychological or sociological facts or natural facts. There have also been attempts to reject them outright as an error theory. We shall take these positions in their proper places.

(2) If there are moral facts or truths, any description of these will be true moral assertions. Moral facts are the things in virtue of which the truth conditions of assertoric moral claims are satisfied; moral facts are the truth-makers of true moral assertions. Needless to say, this particular contention of moral realism had led to a debate between the cognitivists and non-cognitivists in ethics. Cognitivists assume that moral predicates are meaningful and can be used to describe the subjects they are predicated of. The characteristic mood, according to cognitivists, we employ is the indicative mood when issuing moral judgments. We can, of course, assert with conviction that moral discourse is typically declarative or assertive in form

We assert that practices, character traits, or states of vicious, morally attractive, or deserving; we state that motives or actions exemplify such things as goodness, generosity, benevolence. When using evaluative language, most people will find it perfectly natural to characterize their doings as instances of describing things as good or bad, or as attributing to things certain qualities - goodness or badness. Moral talk is sought through with description, attribution or prediction.<sup>6</sup>

The non-cognitivists will deny that moral judgments are assertions or descriptions of moral facts, and hence, true or false. They deny the possibility of there being moral

knowledge. They are evincing a non-descriptive attitude. They cannot be nearly as natural or simple as the cognitivists whose language is putatively fact-stating and that seems to ascribe moral properties to persons, actions, policies and so forth when we say things like this, "The government budget is unfair to the middle class citizen", "It would be wrong to inflict injury to the innocent for pleasure," "My obligation to my family is greater than my obligation to my friends. There are many shades of cognitivism 'crisscrossing' and 'overlapping' the naturalistic/non-naturalistic divide. Yet, cognitivism preserves our talk of moral belief and the possibility of moral knowledge.

(3) According to the moral realists, our moral judgements not only have fact-stating and property-referring form, they have cognitive content as well. Many common moral judgements themselves make reference to moral properties; for instance, it is often claimed that one should not be held responsible for actions one could not have known were wrong, that goodness deserves reward, one should make reparation for favours received, that moral turpitude of a crime should determine the severity of punishment and that good intentions do not always excuse, etc., are moral judgments which presuppose moral properties and relations and make reference to what these judgements are about.

(4) The possibility of knowledge is always bound up with the question of justification. How are moral judgments justified? According to some philosophers, notably the intuitionists like W. D. Ross, moral judgments are justified because they are enjoined by basic moral principles, which are intuitively knowable and self-evident, though seeing their truth may take a good deal of reflection.<sup>7</sup> Self-evident principles are paradigms of appropriate objects of foundational belief. For, if there were no non-

inferentially justified principles, then we would not be justified in holding anything. Thus, intuitionism upholds a kind of moral foundationalism. However, moral philosophers have more and more leaned towards the coherence theory of justification. A coherence theory in ethics claims that one's moral beliefs are justified insofar as they cohere in some appropriate way. John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*<sup>8</sup> defends a coherence theory of justification in ethics that emphasizes the evidential role of considered moral beliefs. David Brink also thinks that only coherentism can provide us with the best reasons for holding realist moral beliefs.<sup>9</sup> Sayre-McCord<sup>10</sup> is another prominent advocate of coherentism because he believes that the justification of any belief is a function of its inferential or evidential relations with other beliefs. And similar ideas are entertained by Mark Timmons<sup>11</sup>. However, the coherentist theory of justification for moral beliefs has been criticized by philosophers like R. M. Hare,<sup>12</sup> Ronald Dworkin<sup>13</sup>, David Lyons<sup>14</sup>, Richard Brandt<sup>15</sup> and others.

One of the significant issue or concern of moral realism is objectivity. By objectivity, we understand a kind of impersonality and detachment. The objective point of view is incompatible with the subjective point of view. It is indifferent to a person's subjective concerns. Most authors writing about objectivity in ethics focus on an important comparative issue. Is ethics or can ethics be objective in the way that other disciplines such as the natural sciences and social sciences like sociology, economics, and political science are, can be or seem to be? Natural sciences, for example, physics, chemistry, biology and social sciences like, for example, psychology, history, economics, study real objects and events whose existence and nature are largely independent of our theorizing about them; that they exhibit progress and convergence over time and contain some kind of knowledge. The question is if ethics is objective in

this sense. It has been observed that ethics is not objective in the sense sciences are. There is a problem of realism or objectivity in ethics. From another point of view, it has been maintained that ethics is objective in much the same way science is objective. Particularly, the intuitionists believe that ethics does or can possess the marks of objectivity.

Another view is that the commonsense view of scientific objectivity is naive. The common sense view of scientific objectivity is not fulfilled by science itself. Once we understand the kind of objectivity science involves we can see that ethics is or can be every bit as objective as the sciences. It is considered a superstition today that science is out and out impersonal, that it can completely do away with the scientist's personal point of view. Indeed, there is no denying of the fact that the scientists power of observation, imagination, thought processes influence, to a large extent conceptualization that contribute to scientific discovery. For example, in the Preface to *Principia Ethica*, Moore says, "I have endeavoured to write 'Prolegomena to any future Ethics that can possibly pretend to be *scientific*.' In other words, I have endeavoured to discover what are the fundamental principles of ethical reasoning; and the establishment of these principles, rather than of any conclusions which may be attained by their use, may be regarded as my main object."<sup>16</sup> Again, while referring to the subject matter of ethics as answering the question: what is good? , Moore says, "...to the discussion of this question (or these questions) I give the name Ethics, since that *science* must include it."<sup>17</sup> If that be so, then there is no harm in labeling ethics as objective too.

Moral objectivity gets support from the nature of moral inquiry itself. In moral arguments and deliberations, it seems, we are trying to discover what sorts of things are

valuable, praise-worthy or obligatory. We *recognize* moral requirements, and how they constrain our will and our conduct. We think people can be morally mistaken, and some people are morally more perceptive than others.

Moral objectivity partly concerns the ontology of values, specially value's relationship to the moral agent's aims. Is honesty, e.g., good because we admire it, or do we admire it because it is good? Objectivity is also an issue about the kinds of reason that support morally. Are they objective in the sense of being binding upon or necessarily motivating for all moral agents as such? Or it may be the objectivity warranted by the universalizability thesis. And objectivity is an issue about moral epistemology also. Is there objective evidence - evidence other than subjective conviction, or independent of subjective variation in those judging for any moral claim? There are various approaches to these questions, which at bottom show great plurality and diverge. We shall take them up in the proper place to show that they fail to supply evidence against moral realism.

As in epistemology, in morality also, there is the basic challenge of the skeptic – the moral skeptic. The skeptic challenges the moral realist's claim that moral beliefs can be justified. While occasional skepticism is tolerable in any area of knowledge, justification or grounding of belief at large should be possible. Justification can take various forms. There are some major significant positions to consider. Particular moral judgements may be justified by an appeal to moral rules, e.g., it is wrong to punish mentally challenged persons as they do not understand what they are being punished for. We can justify such moral rules with reference to moral principles, e.g., that it is wrong to inflict pointless suffering. There is also foundationalism as a theory of justification in ethics. It says that a moral belief is justified if it is ultimately traced to

certain basic moral beliefs. Coherentism, as we have said above, takes account of justifying moral beliefs in terms of their coherence with a total system of beliefs. These are some of the dominant approaches in current ethical theories to meet the skeptic. We shall indicate the scope and viability of some major positions in moral epistemology and make reasonable selection.

The present work, as is evident from what has been stated in this introduction, has, at least two tasks—the negative task of defending the contentions of the moral realist against objections, particularly from the moral skeptics, and the positive task of defending a case for moral realism. The positive and negative tasks are often difficult to separate. The task of building up and demolishing may go on together. Much of the arguments presented here will pursue the negative task. The positive task will be to show that moral realism can withstand the standard metaphysical and epistemological objections.

## Notes and References:

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16. G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954 edn. ,  
1954, p.ix. Emphasis is ours.
17. *Ibid.*, p.2. Emphasis is ours.