CHAPTER II

TELEOLOGY AND DELIBERATE CHOICE : ARISTOTLE

II

The last movement of Beethoven's last quartet is based on the following two motifs :

Muss es sein ?
Es muss sein! Es muss sein!
(Must it be?
It must be! It must be!)[1]

And this is the voice of fate. This is the voice that dominates whole of the age of myth and the great Greek tragedies. But man of every age asks again and again: *Muss es sein*? Must it be? Must the world experience nuclear threat? Must I have to hate the people of Pakistan in order to love India? Is there nothing that would prevent man from digging his own grave? Is there no way out from legalising the immoral? A determinist would argue by putting counter questions: "Are not human actions, like everything else in nature, under the reign of natural law, which rigidly determines whatever happens in the world, including human behaviour? Are we not all caught in the clutches of the law of cause and effect, so that every act of ours is caused by some preceding event or condition? Can the human will escape the chains of mechanism which prevail throughout nature?"[2] If we are to avoid chance and chaos reason suggests that all our actions, like events in nature, should obey nature's laws, that they are strictly deducible from other antecedent events. But we are not ready to accept this, "We think that the future is open and although only one out of various paths into the future can be followed, we believe that it is sometimes up to us to decide which one to follow. That is, we believe that we have what Fisher would call a 'regulative control' over our future."[3] And it is a common belief among the moral agents that moral responsibility requires regulative control. This

regulative control entails freedom of will. In fact, that we have a "regulative control" is more a hope than a belief. Any way, if in antiquity determinism has found expression in the myths and "tragedies", the first confident voice upholding freedom of will is found in Aristotle. Before we pass on to Aristotle, we shall have a brief excursion into the theory of the Sophists and the ethical ideas of Plato.

Sophists make a distinction between what is man in himself and what he is in society. They maintain that our moral judgements represent not real values we set on things, but our fear of suffering injustice. Society makes laws and punishes because it is afraid. There is no morality apart from the laws made by society. Thus "... no man is just willingly, but only on compulsion."[4] Clearly sophists maintain a deterministic outlook and cast doubt on the power of human intellect to arrive at truth. They hold that, "...there is no question of one ethical view being true and another false, but there is question of one view being 'sounder', i.e., more useful or expedient than another."[5]

If we sharpen the sophistic view we find that according to them there are conflicting ethical opinions that are equally valid. That may be understood in at least two ways. First, it may be interpreted to mean that some ethical opinions are not more valid than some others which conflict with them. Second, it can be interpreted as saying that different individuals sometimes in fact have conflicting ethical opinions. This is established by showing that people disagree. Third, it can also be taken to assert the more radical thesis that individual's ethical opinions are at least, to some extent dependent on the cultural mores of their own group. But every one will also agree that societies somehow spawn their own moral critics. If a society enjoins upon its members the principle: Never say what is false, an

individual member of the society who subscribes to the principle, may, nevertheless decide to say what is false, perhaps because the nature of his situation requires him so to decide. If his judgement conflicts with another's, that means they do not have the same belief and appraisal of the situation. If this understanding of the sophist's view is unobjectionable then we may venture to say that they have given a place to individual freedom, freedom of criticising, of changing and even abandoning mores of a community. Such a theory however has its difficulties. It envisages the possibility of their being a number of ethical 'truths'. Every truth being equally useful, leads us nowhere, becomes equally useless. The result is not illumination but obscurity. Instead of providing a guide to conduct it creates a state of mental befuddlement. However, the sophists at least laid bare the fact, so rightly insisted upon by Socrates that "the proper study of mankind is man". Where they erred was their excessive emphasis upon individual differences.

Again every man thinks that injustice is more profitable to the individuals than justice ..."[6] The conclusion of sophism is the natural outcome of the sophistic introspection with their "empirico-inductive method".[7] They do not intend to discover truth which lies outside the realm of man because, as Sophocles says, "Wonders are many on earth, and the greatest of these is man".[8] The arguments of sophists are fair but contain a little inconsistency. With a fear to suffer one cannot think injustice to be more profitable. Injustice as well as justice presuppose the existence of other people. So the act of injustice cannot be separated from suffering injustice. If one fears suffering injustice, one should think justice as more profitable than injustice. Secondly, Thrasymachus, a sophist linguistically used 'justice' and 'injustice' as two different words (The Republic, Book

II). I cannot think of one who recognises the difference between 'justice' and 'injustice' as justice. If I condemn an act 'X' and you don't, then it must be that I think 'X' as wrong and you think it as right. But we may doubt Plato's impartiality in bringing out sophist's actual view. Plato must have been forgotten that it is his Master Socrates who says that no one does wrong knowingly. "We must, however, remember that Plato tends to bring out the bad side of the Sophists, largely because he had Socrates before his eyes, who had developed what was good in sophism beyond all comparison with the achievements of the sophists themselves."[9]

The tragedian discovered the necessary laws of nature dictating our future from outside. The sophists seemed to have believed that moral principles cannot be shown to be valid for everyone and that people ought to follow the conventions of their own group. This position seems to belong in a twilight region between teleology and deontology. In Plato too, we do not find any abstract morality. Like his master Socrates, his interests were practical. Morality is discussed in legal or political terms. "Justice exists in a state as well as in an individual, because a state is simply the lives of its citizens; and if we find that society is a natural expression of man's nature, we may conclude that the social justice is the natural expression of the justice in man's soul."[10] In Plato's own version,

> Then perhaps justice may exist in greater proportions in the greater space [in a city than in an individual] and be easier to discover. So, if you are willing, we shall begin our inquiry as to its nature in cities and often that let us continue our inquiry in the individual also, looking for the likeness of the greater in the form of the less.[11]

Plato finds that the sophistic distinction between man- individual and man-social is invalid and unreal.[12] Secondly, for Plato good life is not something to be lived apart from, and often in spite of the social system of the day. To Plato the division of life into a public and a private sphere was not to be tolerated. Politics and morals were the same. The good life was possible only in a good state. In this ideal of harmonious living, the Aristotelian or the Kantian moral tension could have no place. Moral reason can have no meaning there other than logical reason. Moral ideas are the results of true and faithful reflection on the ordinary world. Plato is clearly a moral determinist by assuming "virtue is knowledge and that virtue is teachable."[13] Athenian Plato is rather an admirer of Sparta.

Aristotle, however, recognises the difference between moral and logical reason. "As to the question what is the good of man, Aristotle points out that it cannot be answered with the exactitude with which a mathematical problem can be answered, and that owing to the nature of the subject matter, for human action is the subject matter of ethics, and human action cannot be determined with mathematical exactitude."[14] As to the nature of the human action that makes a human being different, Aristotle points out that it is not the mere act of living since this is also shared by the vegetative kingdom. A step higher is the life of experiencing sensation; but this is also shared by horses, cows and brute creation as a whole. And then remains the rational part of man and this really is peculiar to man. So, the function of man is the exercise of his non-corporeal facilities in accordance with a rational principle.[15] Aristotle then makes note of the fact that human beings have a corporeal body which cannot be ignored. In chapter thirteen Book I of Aristotle's *Ethics* we get a clear picture of human soul which he divides into two parts: rational and irrational. The irrational part again

consists of a vegetative part and an appetitive part. The former is devoid of any rationality and the latter, i.e., the appetitive part, from which spring the appetites and desires in general, in a way, takes part in rational activity. In a sense, the rational part may be divided into rational part proper and a derivative part.[16] Aristotle says "... the irrational emotions are no less human than considered judgements."[17] Aristotle's ethics of virtue is to be understood in the light of his above consideration. Virtues are of two kinds : 'intellectual' and 'moral'. The former probably belongs to the world of so-called 'pure reason' and the latter is to be considered in the context of double citizenship of human soul.

The important points in Aristotle's conception of moral virtue can be noted down as follows:

(i) Virtue is a "child of habit"[18]

(ii) Virtues and dispositions

(iii) Virtues consist in avoiding extremes.

Aristotle accepts the Platonic concept that virtues can be taught, without doubt. Therefore, he infers that virtues are habits; they are "... produced in us neither by Nature nor against Nature."[19] The argument of course could run in the opposite way: virtues are habits, therefore, they can be taught. It may turn out to be circular. It is interesting to note that both Plato and Aristotle hold that virtues can be taught but unlike Plato, the pure spiritualist, the compatibilist Aristotle is not saying that virtue is knowledge. As to the second point, that virtues are dispositions, Aristotle defines virtues as "... a mean condition as lying between two forms of badness, one being excess and the other deficiency ...".[20] "Virtue, then, is a disposition, a disposition to choose according to a rule, i.e., the rule by

which a practically wise man would determine it." Virtue is a disposition and not an arithmetic mean, neither it means any mediocrity in the moral life. Virtue is a mean only from an ontological point of view. From the axiological point of view, virtue is excellence.

To establish virtue as a disposition in contrast to some *apriori* or innate quality and to account for moral responsibility, Aristotle is first, in a true sense, to introduce the concept of free-will as postulate behind virtues. "... our virtues are in a manner expressions of our will; at any rate, there is an element of will in their formation."[21] The first two of the points mentioned earlier about his concept of virtue can thus be reconciled in the light of his concept of will in the following statement : Virtue is a habit of willing or habit of deliberate choice of the mean condition. Man should be courageous, courage is the main between cowardice and rashness. Man should be generous, generosity is the mean between miserliness and overspending. Following the biological analogy Aristotle recognises that as good health consists in the right state of the body, a rightly balanced state of its components, so the mind also enjoys good health so long as it avoids excess on one side and deficiency on the other. Through this conception of mean Aristotle links ethics to the needs of man, and it becomes an ethics of achievable virtues. It never occurred to Aristotle to doubt the freedom of the will. But it is not some power of acting without any motive. "... we all have some pleasurable or honourable motive in everything we do."[22]

Free will has been described as a deliberate choice by Aristotle. It is a choice of means and not of ends, because the end is determined and that is "*eudaimonia*". The word "*eudaimonia*" is usually rendered as "happiness", but the word really means "good life" or "well being" or "blessedness".[23] Again, he says that it is the rational part "which makes

deliberate choice". Are reason and will the same? It needs a separate and detailed investigation. It suffices for the present to note that the exercise of the highest virtue, pure contemplation, flows from the worthiest part of human nature, the intellect or mind. Pure contemplation is necessarily accompanied by the greatest happiness man can possibly find. Intellect the worthiest or the highest of the components which make up human nature is not separated from the remaining constituents of man.[24] Hence Aristotle's view offers a rational vision of morality. Being an advocate of freedom of will, Aristotle is not at all a deontologist. The necessary connection between voluntarism and deontologism, I think, is a Christian contribution. Aristotle is a teleologist in respect of moral obligation. Whenever he seems to be a deontologist or whenever his philosophy seems to contain deontological elements, he is not consistent. For instance, in the fourth chapter of Book II of *Ethics*, Aristotle says that the doer (moral agent) must be in a certain frame of mind when he acts (page 61). In this respect, he mentions three conditions :

(I) The agent must act in full consciousness of what he is doing.

(II) He must will his action and will for its own sake.

(III) The act must proceed from a fixed and unchangeable disposition.

Now willing an action for its own sake seems to be a deontological standpoint. But in the previous chapter, i.e., chapter three of the same book, Aristotle writes :

(IV) "... moral virtues have to do with pains and pleasures". Actions and emotions are accompanied by pains and pleasures.

"Moral goodness is a quality disposing us to act in the best way when we are dealing with pleasures and pains.[25]

Now, (II), to will an action for its own sake together with (I), being conscious of doing that action such that (IV), pleasures and pains are dealt properly are certainly not consistent. Another point can be mentioned concerning Aristotle's rational vision of morality. True that Aristotle does not, like Plato, identifies virtue with reason or prudence. But reason plays a great and indispensable role in his ethics. Virtues are attitudes but cannot be without prudence. They are not rational but all reasonable. "Virtues are not only the right and reasonable altitudes, but the attitude which leads to right and reasonable choice, and right and reasonable choice in these matters is what we mean by prudence."[26] Aristotle, then, is not a deontologist; he holds a teleological view in morality. Although our end in morality is fixed according to him, he is not a determinist. We are free to choose the means to the end. If the real issue in ethics is the "... opposition between rationalism and voluntarism",[27] Aristotle is a compatibilist.

It is one of the prejudices of the moral philosophers, specially of the Christian tradition to distinguish moral from the political or legal and this is done on the basis of free-will. Freedom of will is only compatible with deontology, they think. Bradley, for example, thinks that it is illegitimate to ask why should one be moral. To ask it would suggest that there was some ulterior purpose behind the exercise of virtue, or the performance of duty. Bradley thinks that to take virtue as means to an ulterior end is in direct antagonism to the voice of moral consciousness.[28] But this is not the case with the legal or political. It is always legitimate to ask why should one obey the law of the state. But does Aristotle divide ethics and politics in that way? Let us examine.

For Aristotle, ethics is a branch of politics. He has no doubt about that. "Now, most people would regard the good as the end pursued by that study which has the most authority and control over the rest. Need I to say that this is the science of politics?[29] In what sense is ethics a branch of politics? Is it the sense in which metaphysics or epistemology is a branch of philosophy? If so, then ethics would not be an indispensable part of politics. That is, without ethics, politics could maintain its identity. Aristotle writes: "It is political science that prescribes what subjects are to be taught in states, which of these the different sections of the population are to learn, and up to what point."[30] In this sense, ethics and politics are both branches of politics in the same sense. But that's not all and Aristotle has something different in his mind. He writes "... end of politics as well as ethics can only be the good for man. For even if the good of the community coincides with that of the individual, the good of the community is clearly greater and more perfect good to get and to keep."[31] That is, the state and the individual have the same good, though this good as found in the state is greater and nobler. Ernest Barker rightly observes : "It would thus seem, from the beginning of the *Ethics* that ethics is in a sense subordinate to politics – which does not mean for a moment that political *raison d' état* can over bear ethics, but only that 'community ethics' is a higher stage in the march of human development than individual ethics."[32] Thus, politics is only the greater ethics and free will does not distinguish between them. Free will is a necessary condition for both moral and political responsibility. Both ethics and politics have the same end and community good is nobler only because it includes the good of the individual and of other members of the community. In the light of the above discussions, it is evident that ethics and politics are intimately related, and differ only in their extent of field of application.

Now considering the facts that for Aristotle (i) happiness is the only thing worth having and that a life is to be judged good if it makes the life of man happy, we may say that he is a teleologist and from the fact that (ii) the greater the number it, i.e., happiness, covers, greater the good it is, we can say that he is certainly a utilitarian.

Notes and References

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[1] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*,Delhi : Rupa and Co. 1998, page 32.

[2] G. T. W. Patrick, *Introduction To Philosophy* : page 305.

[3] William Rowe on Fisher's *The Metaphysics of Free-will* in "Ethics"(Journal), vol. 107, No. 1 Oct. 96.

[4] Plato, *The Republic* , (Book III, 360c), page 37.

[5] F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Vol I), London : Search Press, 1976, page 89.

[6] *The Republic* (Book III), page 37

[7] F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*: (Vol I), page 83.

[8] Sophocles, *The Theban Plays* (translated by E. F. Watling), London : Penguin Books, 1974, page 135.

[9] F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*: (Vol I), page 86.

[10] From the Summery of *The Republic*, page xxii.

[11] *The Republic*, 369a, page 45.

[12] Ibid, page xxii.

[13] F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Vol I), page 219.

[14] Ibid, page 332-333.

[15] Aristotle, *Ethics* (Book I), page 38.

[16] Ibid, page 52.

[17] Ibid, page 82.

[18] Ibid, page 55.

[19] Ibid, page 55.

[20] Ibid, page 66.

[21] Ibid, page 63.

[22] Ibid, page 79.

[23] *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol. VIII), London : Encyclopaedia Britannica Ltd., 1958, page – 763.

[24] F. Grayeff, A short Treatise on Ethics, London : Duckworth, 1980, page 5.

[25] *Ethics*, page 60.

[26] F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*: (Vol I), page 344.

[27] *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (vol. II), (ed. Paul Edwards), New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1972, page 35.

[28] M. Warnock, *Ethics since 1900*, London : Oxford University Press, 1976, page 2.

[29] *Ethics* : Book I, page 26.

[30] Ibid, page 26.

[31] Ibid, page 27.

[32] E. Berker, (Appendix to) *The Politics of Aristotle*, London : Oxford University Press, 1952, page 355.