

COGNITION OF VALUE

In this paper I propose to discuss the problem of cognition of value, that is to say, how value is known. Since this question has been mainly discussed by Intuitionist thinkers, I shall, confine myself to the examination of their position, taking G. E. Moore as their representative.

Moore has not raised this problem at any one place. However, his answer to this question is scattered throughout *Principia Ethica* and his other writings. We all know that his key value expression is 'good' and he does not consider all value judgements to be of the same kind. He, therefore, divides them into two broad types, viz., judgements of intrinsic goodness and judgements of good as means. He also holds that these judgements are not arrived at in the same manner. According to him, the way we judge the intrinsic goodness of a thing differs from the manner we judge the instrumental goodness of it. He also maintains that a judgement of intrinsic value is involved in every judgement of instrumental value. I shall, therefore, take up the question of the knowledge of intrinsic value first, and then go on to see how instrumental value is cognised.

In the preface to *Principia Ethica*, writing about the judgement of intrinsic goodness, he says that the truth of these judgements cannot be adduced from any relevant evidence. Their truth cannot be inferred from the truth or falsity of any other judgements except themselves alone. He expresses this fact by calling such judgements 'Intuitions'. However, he immediately says that 'I am not an "Intuitionist" in the ordinary sense of the term'.¹ He explains this remark by saying that 'when I call such propositions "Intuitions", I mean merely to assert that they are incapable of proof; I imply nothing whatever as to the manner or origin of our cognition of them'.² Thus, even when he calls the judgements of intrinsic goodness 'Intuitions' he leaves us wondering as to how such propositions are known or cognised.

However, he has not left us totally in the dark. He has dropped sufficient hints at places which give us an idea as to how goodness is cognised in his theory. If we put together his different

remarks scattered in his writings, we may get a clear idea as to how, according to him, propositions of intrinsic goodness are known.

Arguing against the contention that 'good' means 'desire to desire' he says that

...any one can easily convince himself by inspection that the predicate of this proposition—'good'—is positively different from the notion of 'desiring to desire' which enters into its subject: 'That we should desire to desire A is good' is *not* merely equivalent to 'That A should be good is good'.³

We all know that according to Moore 'good' denotes a simple and undefinable quality. Now if we keep this in our mind, he seems to suggest, in the above quotation, that the quality of goodness is known in a manner analogous to visual perception. Here he seems to convey that 'good' and 'desiring to desire' are different notions and that they are not equivalent can be known by inspection in a way similar to the way the difference between a table and a chair can be known, by inspecting them.

This interpretation of his views gets support when we find him arguing against the theory that 'good' could be defined in terms of other notions like pleasure etc. Here he says that

"...Whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question 'Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?' can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant. And if he will try this experiment with each suggested definition in succession, he may become expert enough to recognise that in every case he has before his mind a unique object, with regard to the connections of which with any other object, a distinct question may be asked."⁴

Here, also, his use of the expressions 'what is actually before his mind' and 'recognise' appears to suggest an analogy with recognising a thing which is before our vision or eye. This interpretation gets a further point in its favour, when Moore tries to explain to us the meaning of 'correspondence' in order to see whether or not it is like the meaning of 'truth'. He, therefore, asks us to hold before our minds the notion conveyed by the word 'correspondence' and explains to us what he wants us to do in this way. He says that

“ The essential point is to concentrate attention upon the relation *itself* : to hold it before your mind, in the sense in which when I name the colour ‘ Vermilion ’ you can hold before your mind the colour that I mean.⁵ ”

This comparison gives us a clear idea of what Moore means by the expression ‘ holding before one’s mind ’. When someone asks us to hold a colour before our mind, all that we understand him asking us to do is to look at a sort of mental photograph or colour chart. It is like keeping before our mind’s eye an image-copy of what we once saw with our physical eyes. Keeping a colour before our mind is like ‘ mentally seeing ’ the colour. Moore at one place clearly says this when he compares holding a notion before the mind with directly perceiving a sense-datum. To quote him :

“ And it seems to me that in this case we can perhaps distinguish the universal in question : that we can hold the number two before our minds, and see what it is, and *that* it is, in almost the same way as we can do this with any particular sense datum that we are directly perceiving.⁶ ”

We can, therefore, conclude, with some certainty, from the above statements that in Moore’s view one can know that a thing is intrinsically good in a manner analogous to knowing something through sense perception.

But, here, we find ourselves confronted with another difficulty. Whenever we directly perceive a sense-datum, it is perceived through some sense organ. But, *which* is the organ through which we directly know ‘ goodness ’ ? Certainly it is not known through any of our five sense organs viz., eye, ear, nose, tongue and touch (skin). For, everything that we know through these sense-organs are ‘ natural ’ in nature, whereas ‘ goodness ’ is ‘ non-natural ’ according to Moore. Like common intuitionists, he is not also prepared to accept ‘ intuition ’ as the special sixth source of knowledge in addition to our common five sense-organs. This is so because he clearly states that by calling a judgement of intrinsic goodness ‘ Intuitions ’, he implies nothing about the manner of their origin or cognition. Thus even when he suggests that we have a direct awareness of ‘ goodness ’ by inspecting it, in a manner analogous to our direct perception of sense-data, we are left

wondering as to how the inspection is done. This problem becomes all the more intricate when we find him telling us that we cannot even keep the notion of 'correspondence', for that matter any notion, before our mind 'If you are not acquainted with this relation in the same sort of way as you are acquainted with the colour 'Vermilion'; no amount of words will serve to explain what it is, any more than they could explain what vermilion is like to a man born blind'.⁷

Another point which adds to our difficulty in appreciating the manner of cognising good in this theory is Moore's contention that 'the *object* of imagination—what we imagine—is *not* identical with any image which we may be directly perceiving when we are imagining. . . .'⁸ If this is so, then *what* we can keep before our mind when we consider the question 'Is pleasure after all good' in our imagination ?

Having discussed the method of knowing intrinsic goodness in Moore's theory, it is time that we proceed to find out the way in which, according to him, one knows instrumental values. We have already seen that according to him the judgements of right and the judgements of duty fall under the class of judgements of instrumental value. Hence we will take up the question as to how we know what is right and what is a duty.

Moore says that

"the word 'right' is very commonly appropriated to actions which lead to the attainment of what is good; which are regarded as means to the ideal and not as ends-in-themselves. This use of 'right' as denoting what is good as a means, whether or not it be also good as an end, is indeed the use to which I shall confine the word."⁹

Thus we find that to judge an action to be right, according to him, is to judge two things at a time. It amounts to judging that the action in question causes another thing and that that thing is intrinsically good. What an action gives rise to is known by ordinary experience of every day life or by scientific inquiries. And when it is known what the action in question leads to, we judge whether or not the latter possesses intrinsic goodness.

He defines 'duty' 'as that action which will cause more good to exist in the universe than any possible alternative. And what is "right" or "morally permissible" only differs from this, as what will *not* cause *less* good than any possible alternative'.¹⁰ Hence to judge that certain actions are our duty is to presume that to act in those ways will produce the greatest possible good. When one judges that to do no murder is a duty, he presumes that the action called murder will under no circumstances cause so much good to exist in the universe as its avoidance will.

He says that if this view of duty be accepted, then the theory that intuition is a mode of cognising our duty has to be rejected. It is no doubt true that we sometimes make immediate judgements that certain actions are obligatory or wrong, thus we are sometimes intuitively certain of our duties. But this certainty can be only in the psychological sense. Such judgements are not self evident, for they are capable of being confirmed or refuted by investigating their effects and calculating their goodness. It is possible that sometimes our immediate intuitions are true, but since, in these cases, *what* we intuit is that certain actions would always produce the greatest amount of goodness under the circumstances, it is obvious that we can always present reasons to show whether or not such intuitive judgements are true.

Another effect of accepting this notion of duty, according to Moore, is that in order to judge that a particular action is a duty, it is necessary that the person concerned must fulfil the following conditions : (1) He must know the other conditions which along with this action produce the effect. (2) He must know what exactly will be the effect of these conditions. (3) He should also know all those events which are likely to be affected by the action throughout the infinite future. Besides, having this causal knowledge, (4) he must also know precisely the amount of goodness of the action in question and also of all these effects. (5) He should also be able to know how the action and these effects in conjunction with the other things in the universe will affect its goodness as an organic whole. Not only this, (6) he must also have all this information concerning the effects of all possible alternatives. And (7) he should also be able to see by comparison that the total goodness produced by the action in question

will be greater than the goodness which would be produced by any of these alternative actions. Now in the face of these requirements for judging that a particular action is our duty and finding that our knowledge of causal connections fall far short of these requirements, Moore concludes that we can never know with any certainty that a particular action is our duty.

However, Moore holds that although we cannot know our absolute duty, yet we can judge an action to be our duty in a particular situation in a restricted sense. In spite of the fact that we cannot hope to find out which of all the possible actions in a situation is likely to produce the maximum amount of goodness, yet we can hope to decide, with some probability, which among the possible course of actions, which occur to us in a situation, is likely to produce a greater degree of goodness than any of the alternative actions. He is aware that even this limited task is full of difficulties. We cannot give any definite proof that among these alternative actions, the one which we judge to be our duty, in the situation, will produce a greater amount of good than any of the other alternatives. The reason is that we can calculate with some certainty only the actual results of an action in the near future. It is impossible to judge that any one action will produce a better result than the others in the whole range of the infinite future. Hence, all that we can hope in judging an action to be our duty in any particular situation is to achieve some probability and not certainty.

Here Moore has pointed out only the difficulties which arise out of our insufficient knowledge about causes and their effects. But I find some difficulty on another front also. In judging an action to be our duty, we have to judge that the action in question will produce a greater degree of goodness than other alternatives. But in the absence of any single natural factor as the measure of goodness, how can one calculate the goodness of the different effects of an action and judge that it is more or less than the goodness produced by the other courses of action. In the absence of any standard for the measurement of goodness, when one finds that Moore has not also given any alternative scheme of calculation of the goodness of different things, one is left wondering as to how one can judge that the value of one thing is greater than that of any other.

Besides this, Moore seems to be mistaken in his notion of duty. The way he defines 'duty' gives us the impression that people have some absolute duties irrespective of their roles in a society or moral system. But we do not actually judge our duties in the way he thinks we do. We never judge an action to be our duty, even in the restricted sense, by calculating and comparing the goodness likely to be produced by the different courses of action which occur to us in any situation. Our duty, rather, arises out of our particular society or system. We judge our duty in the light of our social position and the functions we perform and are required to perform. While judging the merits of alternative courses of action which occur to us at a time, we choose that course of action to be our duty which we think is in consonance with our role in the system and which is the best in the interests of the system. Here we do not think as to which of these alternative courses of action is likely to bring into existence the maximum amount of goodness in the *universe*. Moreover, when we judge an action to be our duty, we always judge so as a member of a society or a system and in virtue of our position in the system. We never judge any action to be our duty as an individual, living in absolute isolation, and thinking about the goodness which he could bring into existence in the universe.

Moore uses 'good' in two senses. In one sense, he uses it to denote a simple, indefinable and non-natural quality. This is the sense in which he generally uses it. But there is also another sense in which he uses it, i.e., to denote the 'ideal' or the end which some one wants to achieve. This sense of 'good' is clear from his statement when he says that 'the word "right" is very commonly appropriated to actions which lead to the attainment of what is good; which are regarded as a *means* to the ideal and not as ends-in-themselves'.¹¹ But he fails to keep the two senses apart. It is due to this failure that, even after saying that the only difference between an action which is a duty and an action which is right is that the former will not produce less good than any possible alternative, he goes on to insist that among the possible courses of action which occur to a person in any situation, only that action is his duty which is likely to produce the maximum amount of goodness in the universe. But it is obvious that a man seldom aims at producing the maximum possible amount of goodness in

the universe. Hence he should rather, have said that among the possible course of action in a situation only that action is a duty which is the most effective means of achieving the ideal of the person concerned.

Department of Philosophy,
Magadh University,
Bodh-Gaya, (Bihar).

—Vimalendu Narayan Sinha

NOTES

1. *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge : At the University Press, First paper-back, 1959), p. x.
2. *Ibid.* p. x.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
4. *Ibid.* p. 16.
5. G. E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, (London : George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1953, reprinted in 1962), p. 279.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 366.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 248-249.
9. *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge : At the University Press, First paper-back, 1959), p. 18.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 18.