

THE ROLE OF REASON IN HUMAN ACTION

Ethics as a Philosophical inquiry seeks to understand human action and relate it to the human predicament. The problem of norms of human action is as perennial as the human communities themselves. Ever since human beings started reflecting on their identity they also started deliberating on their relationship with others and consequently on the parameters of their freedom. With the recognition of freedom arose all questions concerning norms and values. For man recognized the distinction between the natural and the normative orders and understood the irreducibility of one to the other. Behind the origin of all imperatives lies the possibility of the visualization of contra-factuals.

The complicated structures of human interactions have led to the development of intricate social institutions and the enforcement of their norms in terms of legal apparatus governed by different state machineries. Behind these laws, created and reiterated by state machineries are certain moral presuppositions which have varied from time to time and have consequently brought changes in the legal systems adhered to by different communities.

Let us go deeper into the moral norms. All moral norms explicitly or implicitly presuppose a vision of man and human nature. If we look back at the history of the western ethical tradition we find a great diversity in the various attempts at the intellectual articulation of the nature of value. These attempts vary because of the status and role accorded to reason in the epistemology of value and its internalization by the different

moral agents. Before going into these let us first analyse the nature of 'reason'. The term reason has had such varied interpretations in different philosophical traditions that it is difficult to lay down a set of essential features which it would connote in all contexts. It varies from being treated as contrasted with faith (and thus embracing in it all attempts at knowing) to regarding it as a quest of universals and self evident truths. There is yet another sense of reason which is different from all these usages (which, inspite their diversity, are essentially concerned with epistemological problems) and that is what, after Kant has come to be known as practical reason. It is with this dimension of reason that we are concerned at the moment. Practical reason can be understood in the following three senses :

- a) as contrasted with impulses and instincts it is reflective and thus is the product of deliberation;
- b) as that which reiterates the autonomy of the agent; and lastly
- c) as that which is in principle universalizable.

Since the idea of being an agent implies being different and irreducible to the natural order which follows predictable patterns based on natural laws, human agency can be understood only if we presume its autonomy. It is this autonomy of man which Kant highlighted when he held that a rational agent is not one who slavishly follows his appetites and impulses. Consequently while natural events have causes human action is the product of deliberation and reflection and thus carries within it a universalizability on principle. These are the three major formal conditions for branding any action rational or irrational in the history of ethical traditions. Moral thinkers have upheld the pursuit of either some or all the three of the above mentioned norms to characterize an ideal human agent. Although Kant may treat them as moral maxims but we must recognize

that these principles lay down only the formal conditions for the possibility of action and do not guide us in our concrete historicity. From time to time philosophers have been vexed at the praxiological emptiness of these maxims. One may recall here the allusion that Sartre has made in *Existentialism and Humanism* to his student who was torn between his duty for his ailing mother and the loyalty towards his enemy-occupied country. Sartre contends that in such moments of crisis no moral philosophy could help this young man to make his choice, he had to choose in total loneliness and despair. It must be seen here that the poverty (highlighted by Sartre) does not lie in the concept of reason because of its inability to account for the practical situations in their multiple nuances; the logic of the reason shows it does not have any necessary and sufficient characteristics. This insufficiency is because of two reasons.

- 1) Every decisive and crucial choice involves a hierarchy of values. Since there is a plurality of values involving different hierarchies at different moments, the ultimate decision lies with the agent.
- 2) The agent is not alone in the world; every action that he performs has three perspectives – that of the agent; that of his fellow beings towards whom the action is directed and that of the onlookers who are uninvolved spectators of that action. We should henceforth refer to these three perspectives as the first, second and third person accounts respectively.

Let us go into these two reasons in greater detail. We said that a crucial human choice is characterized by a plurality of values both cherished by the individual but posed as mutually exclusive alternatives to the agent in a given moment. The crisis is created because of the finitude of human existence and the situational limitations in which every agent exercises his choice.

Consequently it leads to a perennial regret and remorse on the part of the agent. For whatever he may choose, he knows that he can choose only one of the alternatives both equally cherished by him. Take for instance such choices like those between compassion and truthfulness or between benevolence and freedom. One can realize how torn the agent becomes when pushed to make exclusive choices between these values. Practical reason cannot resolve these crises. Only the agent would have to decide which particular value to hold supreme at a certain moment. However, this does not mean that the pursuit of value is private to the individual, the crisis situation is created precisely because both the values are universalizable and there is no single paradigm of value hierarchy which can be held absolute. All models are equally universalizable and are pursued at different moments of time by different individuals following their particular goals and intentions in different periods of their lives. Thus the question is not of either opting for universality or relativism. This variation in the order of values emerges from the very nature of human consciousness which is perpetually belying any static essence. However, to deny any static essence should not be taken as a rejection of coherence and consistency which is the very condition of personhood. An individual in the course of his life is coherently and consistently putting into action his avowed attitudes, beliefs and intentions. Does this amount to saying that rational action is simply coherently and consistently translating one's avowed beliefs and attitudes into action? If this be so then morality would become simply an institutional practice within a certain community and the terms 'reason' and 'rational' would become vacuous. For they, would be equated to the mores and customs of a given social group. It may be argued that since social communities of the world do not have uniform mores, all coherent systems of beliefs, attitudes and actions are equally rational. For instance from a belief in the *home hierarchicus*

would coherently (and thus rationally) follow a treatment of certain sections of society as subservient to others. But we must remember that questioning of the justifiability of certain beliefs and attitudes is an equally important moral concern. And in assessing the justifiability of beliefs and attitudes we must once again turn to the three formal conditions of rationality. It does not suffice to follow any one of these but all the three conditions must be fulfilled. If we recognize that the autonomy of agents is a pre-condition for the operation of the principle of rationality then it would be clear that all beliefs cannot be rational. And despite its internal coherence a system based upon irrational beliefs will be irrational. Thus modification and rejection of beliefs and attitudes is a constant moral exercise of self-conscious agent. In this venture the situations one lives through and the persons one interacts with play an important role. To mention all this is not to say that the situations and other fellow beings hold the key to one's personhood but it is to say that like the changing situations that surround one, persons too are not static entities. They keep growing like a *raga* which slowly unfolds through various tonal forms. However, there is a 'commanding form' (in Susanne Langer's sense) which reverberates in the flux of tonal imagery. It is this commanding form which marks the identity of persons, which - unless there is a crisis which impels one to reframe and restructure one's total prespective - remains relatively constant despite the episodic variations. It is this constancy and consistency which enables us to 'know' other minds, to predict, with more or less reasonable accuracy, their reactions to different situations. However, we must also recognize that just as none of our modes of knowing about ourselves are infallible similarly none of our attempts at knowing the intentions and beliefs of others are free from the possibility of error.

This brings us to our second point about the three-dimensional perspective of all action. Every action, we said, can be

seen from the first, second and third person's vantage point. In physical terms an action may be describable in terms of passing of certain currency notes from Y to X. Y may characterize it by saying that he gave money to X because he thought that X needed it and since he is in a social position of superiority over him he would hesitate asking for money from him for fear of being misunderstood that he is exploiting his position. X may think that Y gave him that money to prove to others that he is a generous man and A, B, C & Z (the onlookers) think that Y gave money because he wanted to bribe X. In each of the individual's action and interpretation of action percolate the social practices, mores and values which he imbibes during the course of his growing up and maturation. These practices and mores are paracritical both upon the economic realities and the sex to which he belongs. The former have been amply underlined by the Marxists to need repetition here but it is the latter which we wish to reiterate. The fact of being a man or a woman quite inadvertently percolates into our decision making process. For, in spite of being unique individuals human agents encapsule within themselves the entire historicity of their particular reference frame. Being born in the Hindu cultural milieu in each woman's psyche percolates the ethos of *sati* – of undaunted devotion to man. A *practico inert* which each woman born in a Hindu family will have to self-consciously transcend if she wants to grow to become a person. The fact that it is possible to transcend these socially and culturally foisted identities shows that in principle it is possible to be free. But all these complexities of one's historicity would make the convergence of perspectives an extremely difficult task. Usually one would say that assuming the coherence and consistency of persons it will be in principle possible to resolve such problems arising out of the multiplicity of perspectives by verifying the facts related to each case and then arriving at a convergence. But does this not have

the following two assumptions ? :

- a) that we always mean what we say, and
- b) if we have acted in a certain way for a certain number of times we will continue to act only in that particular way in all similar situations ? Would not the two of these implications drag us into the Spinozist or Hegelian dispositions and potentialities, the vicious circle of which we shall never be able to break ? The freedom of human existence lies in this very possibility of effacing the past at any given moment. As Sartre says, " my future is virgin; everything is allowed to me " (*Being and Nothingness*, p. 78). If we hold that human beings are free, would we not be forced to recognize that even if X may have acted ten times in a certain way, the eleventh time he can reject all his preceding choices and act afresh. It is this peculiar freedom of persons that generates the multiplicity of interpretations and consequently one faces a perennial regret and remorse at the threat of being misunderstood. Like the hero of Sartre's *Wall* in different periods of our lives we live at the brink of this tragic irony where " we laugh so hard that we cry " (A quote from Sartre's *Wall*).

If this is the destiny of man—to be in perpetual anguish generated by the perennial possibility of being misunderstood and to be totally alone in the moment of choice, is there no hope for him, cannot reason help to solve such enigmas ? The answer would have to be a 'no', we will have to admit that reason can only provide us with a formal framework of action. In the concrete situation it can at best help one to be more self-critical by evaluating the degree of coherence between one's avowed beliefs and intentions with one's actions. It can help one see more clearly the hiatus between one's theory and practice by reviewing one's action from multiple reference-frames and arri-

ving at a possible convergence between them. For, inspite of the multiplicity of interpretations of an action each interpretation will have to carry with it its supporting reasons. If X believes in the equality of sexes than he will be obliged to translate this belief into actions. In such cases it shall be (in principle) possible to bring a concord of his perspective with that of his female associates. For a belief and an intention are not private to the individual but recognizable in terms of his actions. However, confusion in interpretation of actions may arise if after years of male chauvinism he 'suddenly' starts treating women as equals. And also because each one of us in different moments of our lives is tempted to live in bad faith or cheat and pretend to others. How can one decide which interpretation of an action is the most appropriate one? One may say that in such cases one can only make retrospective interpretation. As Sartre would say that only when a man has died can we say decisively whether he was authentic or inauthentic, for as long he was alive, possibilities were open before him. But even when he is dead we can still not deny the possibility of a plurality of interpretations. The complexity involved in our understanding of historical facts is well known to us to make us aware of this problem.

By highlighting this ambiguity in the interpretation of human action may it not be understood that we are supporting a moral nihilism. We may be asked—if the notion of authenticity is ultimately ambiguous why should we be moral? The question has been answered right from the time of Socrates in the *Republic*, when he says injustice (is) fatal when existing in a single person... rendering him incapable of action because he is not at unity with himself' (*The Republic* No. 362).

Philosophy Department
Punjab University
Chandigarh-160014

REKHA JHANJI