

THE IDEA OF A VIRTUOUS LIFE

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In this paper I shall explore the idea of moral personhood as part of a general account of an ethical theory. Specifically, I shall address myself to the issue of what is constitutive of the concept of moral agency and, in this connection, argue that the possibility of a good life for the agent is coextensive with possibility of the agent's living a virtuous life. This argument will embody an account of what one might call "moral striving" definable by reference to the concept of higher-order desires.

1. Morality and Person

Whatever may be the general conceptual complexity of the relation between being human being and being a person, it is sufficient for the particular concern of an either theory to say that humans have the capacity to become moral persons. A morally relevant account of human nature and human flourishing presuppose a connection between being human and being a person. Human flourishing in ethically relevant sense implies that the human individual sincerely engages in the task of attaining moral personhood, and it is undeniable that the attaining of moral personhood is almost synonymous with the actualization of a virtuous life, so long as a virtuous life is considered to be essentially a good life, or the life of a good man.

Being a virtuous man, in the above sense, would be an inalienable part of being a person. In other words, a theory of what is ethically good for man would ideally include an account of what it is to be a person. Otherwise the ethical theory would be highly counter-intuitive. On this John Casey aptly remarks :

Any attempt to describe the good for man which has nothing to say about what it is to be a person, if it gives rise to an ethical theory at all, is likely to issue only in a supremely crude utilitarianism.¹

There are philosophers like Kant and Hegel who derive their ethical theories from the concept of a person. They invoke certain conditions of personhood as necessary for the possibility of morality. However, the passage from the concept of person to ethics is not easy, largely because of disagreements over the meaning of what it is to be a person.

Whatever specific disagreements there might be on the concept of a person, there seems to be unanimity on the point that persons are self-conscious rational beings. That is to say, humans are conscious of what they think and do and can give reasons for their thoughts and actions. It is the feature of self-conscious rationality that is accorded the status of the central determinant of morality by some philosophers. Persons are held to be moral agents because their rationality generates the demands of morality which are to be unconditionally obeyed in the society of persons.

Kant, for instance, espouses the above view. His approach distinctly begins from the concept of a person and he construes the condition of being rational as a condition of freedom to act as well. This freedom, generated by rationality, implies that persons are able to exercise their choice freely and they can incur and acknowledge obligations. Kant establishes an essential link between morality and inter-personal relationships. Reason alone forms the crux of moral personhood, for the crux of Kantian morality is the moral law, and the moral law finds its absolute source in reason. This uncompromising rationality of Kantian morality clearly renders the empirical dimension personhood - the person as a sentient, desiring and passionate being - ethically extraneous. As Casey puts it,

Kant argued that since the moral law must apply to all rational beings generally, then it must apply to man simply as a rational being. No truly moral command could be based on man's 'empirical nature' - upon particular desires, strengths, or skills.²

2. Fragmentation

It is clear then, in so far as Kant is concerned that the category 'moral' is hermetically sealed off from all natural human desires and feelings. The simple possession of 'good will' - the determination to do the right for the sake of the right - is the necessary and only requirement of being a good man. He is truly respected only for having this good will, while other accidental or acquired possessions like intelligence, generosity, wit, good temper are ethically irrelevant. This approach is an impression of Christianity wherein the vagaries of fortune are disregarded leaving thereby no scope for contingency.

Kantianism, or for that matter most other modern ethical theories, over concentrate on duty, rightness, obligation, and consequences. And in the process these theories leave a gap between reason, values, and justification on the one hand and motives on the other. That is to say, the person or the agent concerned finds himself torn between these two sources of action. He is asked to act for the sake of the duty or the consequences which provide the reasons but fall to motivate him. His most cherished personal goods like love, affection, friendship, community get neatly packed out of the sphere of ethics. For they are considered ethically extraneous. Thus he finds his self bifurcated and faces the threat of schizophrenic disharmony which results in weakness of the will, indecisiveness, guilt, shame, self-deception and rationalization. Commenting on this feature of modern ethical theories, Michael Stocker remarks :

As theories of mind, of reasons and motives of human life and activity, they fail, not only by putting us in a position that is psychologically uncomfortable, difficult, or even untenable, but also by making us and our lives essentially fragmented and incoherent.³

The central point is that these modern ethical theories do not allow an integrated approach of reason and motive in achieving the good. A true Kantian or a utilitarian looks upon his own person or the other as a possessor of general values, a source to promote the general good. However, in this pursuit it becomes impossible for a person to combine his motive, for instance, of affection for the other, and the reason of duty for duty sake. In case he wishes to, he invariably falls in an uncomfortable position. A person, for example, helps his friend out of a relation-crisis. His friend, in a sense of gratitude, acknowledges his help that had come in an hour of need. But to his surprise the person in question

declares that it was his duty to do so as a fellow human being. What this means is that any motive for the act other than the reason of duty is considered entirely external to the morality of the matter, and this seems clearly wrong.

It seems wrong because it promotes an alien combination of motive and reason. Here reason for action does not accommodate love, affection, friendship, which are the genuine motives of action. In the absence of which, a person no longer remains a person and does not treat the other as a person. Instead they become the possessors and sources of general values. They appear to be instruments to fulfill the external requirements of duty or optimal consequences. Stocker says : "The defect of these theories in regard to love, to take one case, is not that they do not value love (which, often, they do not) but that they do not value the beloved."⁴

Therefore, an integrated approach requires the inclusion of such motives so that the values of inter-personal relations and activities may also be realized. The harmonious existence of motive and reason, then, is a strip in the direction of a good life, a life where one can also safely entertain virtuous dispositions.

3. Integration

Unlike the Kantian framework of moral personhood which is excessively rationalistic and narrowly focussed, virtue ethics subscribes to a more comprehensive concept of moral personhood which includes natural human desires and satisfactions. A Kantian may call this an error of 'heteronomy'. But a judicious description of virtues, apart from the earlier stated conditions of personhood., will have to include the empirical nature of man. A comprehensive understanding of being a person is needed to cover the full extent of the agent's moral experience, so that the question, "how should we live?" may be posed in its unrestricted sense. This apart, it informs us to stay on guard against the possible danger of a fragmented life.

Thus it seems unsatisfactory to theorize on human morality in terms of righteousness founded solely on reverence for the moral law, and to detach the emotive and volitional aspect of personhood as morally irrelevant. On the contrary, the emotional and volitional aspects preserve certain most significant features of moral personhood. We can cite love and friendship, courage and

loyalty, kindness and benevolence, as an assortment of such features which directly shape the moral character of persons and their inter-relationship.

If the above arguments are right, then we are justified in contesting the claim that self-conscious rationality is sufficient for moral personhood. Kant would definitely like to sustain this claim. But we may reasonably wonder whether that account is really a *fair* account of moral person.. It does not seem so if we are to give full credence to an integral picture of the human again as a moral agent. The integral conception would underscore the *humanity* of the person as a moral agent. And the emphasis on humanity is suggestive of the fact that the attainment of moral personhood is a process of development involving the whole person, both with person and passion.

What is it to be a moral agent? This question needs answering in terms of the *total* moral experience of the *human* agent, rather than in the truncated way that Kantianism accounts for it. The need is for an integral account that finds due room for the moral appropriateness and effectiveness of the affective-dispositional aspects of the human agent. In other words, the actual locus of moral agency is not just pure reason, but also includes non-rational factors such as dispositions and feelings which provide concrete content for abstract reason to deal with. After all, the moral agent is not just a rational subject, but a subject of complex moral experience that involves various feelings as well. We may refer to what Bernard Williams says on this :

Moral experience involves many of one's deepest thoughts and feelings about one's own life and one's relation to others, while at the same time moral rules and expectations constitute one way, a very significant one, in which society is controlled and the relations of one citizen to another are formed.⁵

The fact of moral experience is to be placed in the overall context of the moral life of the agent. For it is by exploring the agent's moral life that the complexity of his moral experience can be articulated. The question therefore is that of delineating the constituents of a moral life. What does a moral life consist in?

Apart from the unquestionable role of rationality, the moral life depends on the presence of a complicated web of various self-regarding and other-regarding attitudes. On this point we can do no better than draw upon the most poignant and elaborate portrayal of the picture of moral reality by P. F.

Strawson in his remarkable paper, "Freedom and Resentment."⁶ Strawson maintains that 'reactive attitudes' form the basis of interpersonal relations, for they are, "the non-detached attitudes and reactions of people directly involved in transactions with each other."⁷ These attitudes basically signify 'involvement' and 'attachment', the notions which weave the thread of moral life. For the study of beliefs involved in having these attitudes and corresponding feelings enable us to comprehend the truth in our 'moral or human existence'.

Reactive attitudes like gratitude, resentment, moral indignation and the feelings of love and hurt constitute the entire human fabric of inter-personal relationships. In fact, the complex network of these human interactions constitutes the moral life. It is in and through these attitudes that human beings participate in a social world. For these attitudes are directly expressive of the status of human beings as free and responsible agents. Graham Nerlich also makes virtually the same point when he says : "Having reciprocal personal attitudes lies deep in the state of being a person."

While other-regarding reactive attitudes constitute the cement of *inter*-personal relationship and thus characterize the social dimension of human morality, there are self-regarding attitudes which play a vital role in the possibility of *intra*-personal moral development, or in what may be described as the individual dimension of morality. What is crucial to these self-attitudes is their normative character and their role in the agents developmental attempt to attain moral personhood. The normative self-attitudes are extremely significant because they very clearly indicate what is central to human personhood. And in this Centrality of human personhood also lies the importance of the individual dimension of human morality.

4. Strong Evaluation : Sketch for a Virtue-Theoretic Ethics :

But what exactly do we mean by normative self-attitudes viz-a-viz moral personhood? We may invoke here the highly insightful ideas of Charles Taylor, who extends the emphasis of what we essentially look for in concept of a person or a self in order to include in it the sense of responsibility.⁹ This he does while developing an idea of H. Frankfurt¹⁰ who maintains that a person is more than a subject of desires, choice, and deliberation. This is to say, the agent has

an ability to form 'second-order' desires because he desires to change the first-order desires which are actually responsible for action. To have a second-order desire is to have a desire whose object is my having an immediate (first-order) desire.

It is true that desires and goals constitute the being of a person and on this line a person is one who can question the existing desire and goals. Taylor avers, "... beyond the *de facto* characterization of the subject by his goals, desires, and purposes, a person is a subject who can pose the *de jure* question: : is this the kind of being I ought to be, or really want to be?"¹¹

Thus the formation of second-order desires itself is a manifestation of reflective self-evolution. That is to say, humans can evaluate and subsequently share their being, or in other words 'mode of life'. Because of this capacity which is considered to be essential to the notion of a person, humans are said to be responsible for what they are.

Taylor, however, maintains that we may extend the capacity to evaluate even to non-human subjects of desire and action. For e.g., a dog evaluates its food positively. But in the human case we are concerned with reflective evaluation, that is evaluation of desires themselves, which a dog is not capable of.

Reflective evaluation can also be weak or strong. In the weak sense, an agent reflects over his desires so as to determine what is convenient to him. On the grounds of 'incompatible contingency' of desires he makes the desired changes. For instance, one is addicted to sweets; a stage comes when he questions the desire to eat sweets. In this process he realizes its bad effects for health and so on. At that stage, he desires not to desire sweets. Now this is what we normally expect from what Taylor calls a 'simple evaluator'.

In the strong sense, the agent's reflection upon his first-order desires is not governed by what would lead to a convenient end, but by a set of values which overrides any matters of convenience. He evaluates desires in terms of their being virtuous or vicious, higher or lower, and noble or base that correspond to different modes of life, fragmented or integrated, and saintly or merely human.

Thus, unlike weak evolution, strong evaluation is embedded in qualitative distinctions. While in the former case whatever is desired is *ipso facto* good, in

the latter case that which is actually desired can still be evaluatively discredited as undesirable, i.e., as bad, base, vicious etc. For instance, a person controls his impulse to refrain from committing an unjust act. He does this not to make some other desired act possible but simply because he believes it to be vicious.

In this case the agent aspires to be a certain kind of person and he does not want to compromise the adopted mode of life by doing, say, unjust act. A person who acts justly, for instance, understands the meaning of justice and honour. He resists the immediate desires to improve on the worth of his life. Here it is not limited by the consideration of how to fulfill desires, but how to bring in a qualitative change in his life. He does not opt for the unjust act because he wants to be a just and honourable human being.

Thus strong evaluation, or rather strong self-evaluation, involves a deep concern with a certain range of values which are informed by what is considered to be a virtuous life. These values draw this sustenance from a range of predominant virtues like courage, justice, kindness, friendship, love, benevolence, practical wisdom and so on. Whenever first-order desires are found to be generative of actions or intentions which are in conflict with what the agent takes to be the parameters of a virtuous life, he tries to form second-order desires in consonance with certain virtues so as to transform his own identity as a person. He strives to become that desired person who would naturally or spontaneously desire to do that which would be a virtuous act.

What makes a self-evaluation "strong" is the fact that the occasion for such an evaluation is a momentous one compared to the more ordinary self-evaluations the agent might make from time to time. The occasions of strong self-evaluation are moments of a radical decision making. For if the predominant virtues are to orientate the agent's life or identity, these would lay strict demands upon the inner life of the agent. Whether it is justice, courage, friendship or temperance, the internalization of each virtue would require of the agent an uncompromisingly sincere striving. It would be a life of ceaseless cultivation of virtuous dispositions, so that the effort actually culminates in the agent's coming naturally to experience his agenthood as sufficiently shaped by the intended dispositions.

5. Conclusion :

The discussion may be rounded up by saying that it is within the framework of the virtue either of Aristotelian provenance, rather than that of Kantian ethics or utilitarianism, that an integral view of moral personhood can be best accommodated, for this framework of virtues can be interpreted as setting standards of higher-order desires, hence of normative self-attitudes or self-evaluations, which put the agent in a process of moral striving as a way of attaining moral personhood. Also, this framework allows the moral agent to be construed as the "whole" person, a person as much regulated and motivated by desires and dispositions as by reason and the sense of duty or obligation. It rightly includes, and recognizes the moral appropriateness of, affective and volitional states in the concept of the moral agent.

NOTES

1. John Casey, *Pagan Virtue : An Essay in Ethics*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 1.
2. *Ibid*, P. 3.
3. In "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXXIII, 1976, p. 456.
4. *Op. Cit.*, P. 459.
5. 'Ethics', in *Philosophy*, edited by A. C. Grayling, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1995 p. 547.
6. In Gary Watson (ed.), *Free Will*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1982.
7. *Ibid*, p. 62.
8. Graham Nerlich, *Values and Valuing : Speculations on the Ethical Life of Persons*, Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 5.
9. 'Responsibility For Self', in *The Identities of Persons*, edited by Amelie O. Rorty, pp. 281-99.
10. See 'Freedom of the will and The Concept of a Person', *Journal of Philosophy*, 1971, pp. 5-20.
11. *Op. Cit.*, p. 281.

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