

BOOK REVIEW

In Search of a Moral Criterion, by Tirthanath Bandyopadhyay :
(Papyrus, Calcutta-4, India, 1994, p. 110. Rs. 50.00).

The title suggests the book is about the search for a moral criterion. The author begins with what may be called as a meta-ethical program. There are some things which are right and wrong and we agree about them but philosophers tend to disagree as to why these right things are right. This requires a criterion and this task is of moral philosophers. Without this criterion moral philosophy would lose its 'survival value'. The author argues that The Principle of Universalisability (PU) is the only criterion of moral maxims. This book is in a way a step towards the rationalist approach to morality looking for a kind of objectivity. The root he finds is in the word morality itself which is identified with humanity. The author may have a few affinities with Kantian theory but his formulation of PU is not Kantian. He presents his views as a philosophical position to be considered in its own merit. The author is very humble in his claim; he is not intending to present the solution of the problem of 'The Moral Criterion' by saying that PU is the only criterion which excludes other criteria but it is not clear whether he is suggesting that other criteria are also having some truth which should be considered as well. He uses PU but the formulation is his own device and by using this we can detect whether a particular maxim of action is morally right or morally wrong.

The neo-rationalist tradition starting with Hare's book *Language of Morals* (London, 1956) suggests two criteria of morality: prescriptivity and universalisability. These two together are considered necessary and sufficient for morality by him. The author of this book suggests that universalisability principle alone is sufficient to determine whether or not a given maxim of action is morally right. Hare talks of 'action', but author of this book talks of 'maxim of an action', R. M. Hare's prescriptive principle he derives from a deeper commitment to humanity and to a kind of necessity interwoven in the obligatoriness itself. Any obligation by its own nature compels us to fulfil it leading to action (it may not be actual action). But this compulsion also allows freedom to act otherwise. I am not sure if in any way this helps us better than Hare's.

The action, as the author argues, is different from the maxim of an action. The universalisability criterion is meant to determine whether an act with certain feature is one that we can regard as morally right or wrong. For the author, it is a criterion of 'some maxims of action actually proposed or conceived in definite terms, as a candidate for moral assessment' (p. 68). If it is a criterion of a maxim then I would tend to think that it is even getting away from the actual action. We may agree with the moral maxim 'Tell the truth' and we may be far away from acting upon this maxim. Hare tries to bridge the gap between maxim and action by taking help of prescriptivity but here the gap is never bridged.

A maxim is a rule which a man makes for himself but it is not identical with moral principle; if it accords with PU then it is morally right, otherwise it is morally wrong. He maintains that a maxim, if morally right, is universalisable and if a maxim of action is not universalisable, it may be amoral. But maxim like 'I take my dinner at 6. p.m.' is not identical with any moral principle; universalized, it will become morally right maxim. At the same time, if I do not agree that it is a moral principle, which it is not (generally speaking), then it does not prove that it is morally wrong to take dinner at 6 p.m. The question of taking the dinner at some particular time is not morally relevant. Thus it is a rule or a maxim which is not identical with moral principles and my agreeing to accord with PU neither makes it morally right nor makes it morally wrong. Further, the problems related to patriotism, that 'I ought to defend my country' is a maxim of action but if universalized goes against the concept of morality - the common good for all and not my good for my country. Its not clear in what way the PU would explain the patriotism-a virtue.

PU is presented in two versions; the will version and the maxim version. It is impossible for the agent to will consistently that the maxim be practised by everyone. Whether someone really in practice wills or not is irrelevant. Conducting thought experiment of asking himself - what happens if everyone else does follow the maxim? This is all one is required to consider. If the consequence is an inconsistency or undesirable result, the maxim in question cannot be accepted as universalisable maxim. But author also on P. 19 talks of 'purpose of PU which purports to show that no morally wrong maxim is universalisable'. My question is - PU used as a criterion to distinguish between morally right maxim and morally wrong maxim, if, in turn, requires us to know

beforehand, what is morally wrong and what is morally right, are we not begging the question of criterion? To put it precisely, if I want to know whether maxim of deceiving others or maxim of inflicting pointless pain is a moral maxim, in turn requires that I must know whether 'deceiving others' and 'inflicting pain' are morally wrong, does PU help me anyway as criterion?

PU maintains that if a certain maxim is deemed to be an ought maxim in a given situation, then the maxim has to be deemed so in all situations that are "typically similar" to that situation and if what is right in one case and may be wrong in another then the two cases must be dissimilar and hence different moral oughts. (P.24). The author explains what is meant by 'typically similar' - not identical but certain distinctive features of s but not so distinctive which would turn it to definite description and make PU vacuous. The problem is perceived rightly, we need a guideline to understand clearly 'certain distinctive features of s but not so distinctive'. But the guideline presented by the author does not seem to guide much. If two situations have same obligation structure i.e. render it morally obligatory for me 'to do, say A, thenthey would be typically similar to each other'. To take his own example, lending cash to a father who needs it for his hungry family is wrong when the father is known to be compulsive gambler or alcoholic shows that we need to capture the difference of the situation by making a distinction between a morally relevant and a morally irrelevant difference. Handing cash to a father who needs it for his hungry family is right and would still be right, knowing lot of other things about him so as to how he dresses up etc. which may be considered as morally irrelevant facts about his life. But a single morally relevant fact may make this moral maxim different; I may conclude differently; quite often just the opposite. To distinguish between the two, a deep sense of morality and understanding is required at every level which he clearly spells out as a 'sincere commitment to a morally right stand' (p. 52). The question remains what we really consider as 'morally right stand'? Answering this the author almost passionately identifies 'being moral' and 'being human'. To quote, "Indeed a maxim gathers moral connotation (i.e., moral rightness and wrongness) for us (i.e., human beings) ultimately in terms of how it concerns us as human persons. This explains why only moral lapses are called human lapses and moral qualities human qualities. Moral assessment is assessment as human beings". I am in absolute agreement with him on this point. But the problem still remains as to what if others do

not agree with me as to what would be counted as 'human'.

Chapter III deals with the question whether imperativehood or oughtness of morally right actions or maxims of action is intrinsic or potential. To put it differently, a person recognizes that a particular action is morally right but is he in any sense obliged to act accordingly? The author believes that by using PU and distinguishing between moral and immoral maxims would not help us much if the result is not followed. "The task of reaching for a moral criterion makes sense only if it is assumed that it is in some sense necessary to follow it". (p. 29). But to a real amoralist no amount of theoretical arguments can help, but to be human is to hardly remain systematically callous to moral requirements. Thus if someone acknowledges the intrinsic dignity of moral life, then when he recognizes that a given action ought to be done, it is not conceivable that he remain totally uninfluenced-this is the necessity he is obliged to follow it-no matter whether he actually follows it or not.

I ought to be moral - due to a purely moral interest as Kant taught us and not for any 'external' grounds such as polity or contract or agreement or happiness or loss and gain calculation. Author also emphasizes on the necessity of being moral from the practical perspective but that does not undermine the need for being moral which is intertwined with the very notion of being human. Moral realm requires man to realize his obligation and possibility to defy moral obligations. To reject the first would lead to not being part of the social structure or human and the rejection of second would lead to 'being moral' to a mere play with words.

Coming back to the issue whether PU alone is sufficient criterion, the author is of the opinion that it is sufficient and we need to consider 'whether it effects our lives in ways we find morally important'. 'While alone sing' may be universalisable but it is not a moral maxim; it is a morally neutral maxim. I feel, it all depends how we look at it, for example, 'While alone sing as loudly as you can', would still be wrong. Author realizes this difficulty and accepts that there is nothing in PU that can settle the issue of determining whether a given maxim is morally assessable or not and it may be due to PU being too wide. But if PU fails to exclude morally neutral maxims from its scope, which means it includes every maxim moral and amoral then we are just claiming that 'maxims are universalisable' and not that 'only moral maxims are

universalisable' which is quite acceptable thesis, and the very purpose of calling upon a 'criterion' is defeated. To put it more clearly, 'stealing is wrong' is a moral maxim iff 'stealing is right' is non-universalisable in the sense that it leads to the situation which no 'human' would like to have. Therefore, 'stealing is right' is immoral or not a moral maxim. But, I do not see how we would convince a person who maintains that 'stealing is right when there is no other way to get' as a moral maxim and therefore that stealing is right is not an immoral maxim.

Morality is not the field of radical choice - the moral dilemmas are real dilemmas due to moral obligations involving different moral claims and having a rational force to follow. Universalisability is a rational requirement but prescriptivity is related with freedom. Realizing this tension between the two the author discusses different problems related with this, such as the moral privatism and rejecting it on the ground that such a view would pose a serious danger to society and would lead to anarchy. How would one know whether the maxim of egoism can be taken as moral maxim or not? If it means 'selfishness' then it cannot be universalized, consequently, cannot be considered as moral maxim. A rational, normal human using universalisability would be able to distinguish between a moral maxim and a non-moral maxim. Maxims of committing suicide, everyone should be thorough going egoist, and never help anyone, cannot be universalized in the sense of will version of universalisability.

Morality demands humanity (p. 59). PU intends to view morality from human perspective. This way of looking at the question of maxim being right or wrong for us is to be answered by us, ultimately the human nature (p. 60). The question remains how are we to look at the human nature; they are often different; we are back to the starting point without much progress.

Further, it seems the author is working on the axiom of non-naturalistic conception of moral knowledge, providing an understanding of moral intuitions which require a mysterious faculty or a mysterious subject matter. He seems to be in good company of a group of British moral realists. (Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning*, Chap. 10, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, John McDowell "Virtue and Reason", *The Monist*, 62, 1979) Their intuition-cum-realism is different from American realism which is essentially naturalistic. But the

difficulty in this arises that it is difficult to maintain the thesis they advocate for; a special moral perspective like capacity, an ability is required to apprehend and appreciate the moral facts, the relation between the moral facts and natural facts of "fixing" but not of deducing etc.

At the end, the book presents a lively discussion on the moral criterion problem and a fresh outlook on PU as rooted in 'humanity' and 'rationality' and 'dignity of man' basing morality on human nature which is basically the Hindu view of morality. It is exciting to see a wonderful way of defending universalisability which may be incompatible with relativistic way of seeing morality but I think the attraction is not much sustaining. The book nevertheless provides numerous important and original contributions to an on-going debate.

ASHA MUKHERJEE

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