

NATURE OF ETHICAL DISAGREEMENT

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When we look at our ethical life we very often come across situations where two or more persons express some kind of controversy on ethical matter. And ethical controversies result in some kind of disagreement e.g. if A says 'X is good' and B says 'X is bad', they are in a controversial state or in a state of disagreement. Whenever we have a conflicting points-of-view on some moral problem we find ethical disagreement. But the fundamental questions that arise in this connection are: what is the nature of ethical disagreement? Is ethical disagreement a disagreement in belief, or is it a disagreement in attitude?, or does it have a dual nature? or does it consist in something else? Metaethicists of this century have tried to treat these problems from different angles. Basically, there are three different point-of-views on this theme such as : (a) ethical disagreement is a disagreement in belief, (b) ethical disagreement is mainly a disagreement in attitude and (c) ethical disagreement is of a dual nature. But besides these, there can be still another point- of-view the fundamental thesis of which would be that matters of ethical disagreement rest on imperatives.

ETHICAL DISAGREEMENT AS A DISAGREEMENT IN BELIEF

In this connection I shall discuss the view of metaethical cognitivists particularly of this century. However, I shall also make some passing reference to some cognitivist stand-points of earlier periods also. Cognitivism, maintains that ethical language is mainly descriptive in nature. Ethical language, we know, comprises of ethical words, sentences, paragraphs and arguments etc. When ethical words or sentences express something, these particular expressions aim at giving some information or knowledge concerning ethical life. Certain implication of this thesis in regard to the general nature of ethical language can be seen on ethical disagreement. Since ethical language aims at certain kind of

description, the resulting controversy or disagreement on ethical matters would assume the form of a disagreement in belief. A disagreement in belief is a matter of dispute as to how a thing is to be described.

There is however another side to the controversy as to whether the thing described is a fact or event or something representing a normative or an ideal state. Some early thinkers of nineteenth century keep ethical phenomena on a par with certain factual states e.g. J. S. Mill equates ethical phenomena with psychological ones, and naturally in his scheme of things a disagreement on the matter of ethics would have direct affinity with psychological state of mind consisting in enjoyment of pleasure or happiness. If anyone disagrees on an ethical matter the disagreement can be said to be due to lack of proper estimation of a psychological state of mind. He would say that one who is able to formulate a proper generalization must agree with him that happiness or pleasure is our sole end. Ethical controversies in his scheme would centre round the problem, whether everyone desires his own happiness or not. Mill's utilitarianism has not been styled in a metaethical frame-work, but still we can say that according to him ethical disagreement is a disagreement in belief and that too on par with factual disagreement. Mill's sentence is suggestive of this.' ... desiring a thing and finding it pleasant, aversion to it and thinking of it as painful, are phenomena entirely inseparable, ...'¹

If we make a dent into still earlier period, we find that even in the writings of Jeremy Bentham we find it in a suggestive form, how a disagreement on ethical question relates to certain factual states. Bentham, we know, is a utilitarian of hedonistic type and has accepted as the fundamental maxim of this doctrine 'the greatest pleasure for the greatest number'. All such ethical words as 'ought', 'right', 'wrong', have meaning only when they are interpreted in terms of pleasure or happiness. He says 'when thus interpreted, the words *ought* and *right* and *wrong*, and others of that stamp have a meaning; when otherwise, they have none.'² Though the question of ethical disagreement has not been discussed by him yet on the question of admissibility of some disputant's hypothesis he has made certain suggestion in the direction that ethical disagreements are mainly factual in nature and thereby consisting in a disagreement in belief. The following passage is suggestive of this :

Has the rectitude of this principle been ever formally contested? It should seem that it had by those who have not known what they have been meaning ... Not that there is or ever has been that human creature breathing, however stupid or perverse, who is not on many, perhaps on most occasions of his life deferred to it ... There are even few who have not taken some occasion or other to quarrel with it, either on account of their not understanding always how to apply it, or on account of some prejudice or other which they were afraid to examine into, or could not bear to part with?³

We have hitherto discussed the nature of ethical disagreement in the light of some naturalistic account given by Bentham and Mill. We have in this connection also noticed that a disagreement on a moral matter has a status of factual disagreement consisting in, to use Stevenson's terminology, belief. An ethical disagreement is a disagreement in belief but cannot be granted a natural status, has been the contention of some non-naturalists like G. E. Moore, Hudson and W. D. Ross. They have particularly supposed a doctrine called 'intuitionism'. We do not intend to discuss in details the different views of various intuitionists on the question of the nature of ethical disagreement. We would, however, like to make a synoptic treatment to Moore's notion of ethical disagreement.

At the very outset two clarifications need to be made. Firstly, Moore himself has not consistently endeavoured to discuss on this matter in the style of some recent metaethicists and secondly, we also notice some shift in his attitude from his first book *Principia Ethica* to his second book *Ethics*. It should however, be said that Moore is a commonsense realist and in regard to knowability of certain ethical properties he has recommended intuition as a source and intuition is not something like a mystic experience. But it is more akin to some kind of special perceptual capacity.

In order to discuss Moore's view on ethical disagreement, one is naturally led to examine this issue in the light of his view regarding 'intuition'. In the situation, A saying 'X is good' and B saying 'X is bad', Moore would recommend that 'intuition' is that faculty which, if rightly applied, gives an opportunity to decide, whether 'X is good' or 'X is bad'. He also holds that matters of ethical dispute cannot be subjected to logical reasoning and intuition only seems to be the right basis for one's ethical position. He says,

'... Pleasure is the only good' is based on my intuition of its falsehood. My intuition of its falsehood is indeed *my* reason for holding and declaring it untrue; it is indeed the only valid reason for so doing ... intuition can only furnish a reason for *holding* any proposition to be true; this however it must do when any proposition is self-evident, when, in fact, there are no reasons which prove its truth.⁴

Moore's use of the term 'intuition' makes us arrive at the conclusion that at least in his *Principia Ethica* stage he is inclined to maintain that an ethical disagreement is mainly a disagreement in belief. But, C. L. Stevenson has endeavoured to point out a change in his previous stand-point in the direction of what Stevenson has suggested in his own book *Ethics and Language*. In an article entitled "Moore's Arguments against certain forms of Ethical Naturalism"⁵ he has brought to notice a shift in Moore's previous position in his *Principia Ethica*. Following passages from Moore's *Ethics* are suggestive of this :

If, whenever I judge an action to be right, I am merely judging that I myself have a particular feeling towards it, then it plainly follows that, provided I really have the feeling in question, my judgement is true, and therefore the action in question really is right. And what is true of me, in this respect, will also be true of any other man ... It strictly follows, therefore, from this theory that whenever *any* man whatever really has a particular feeling towards an action, the action really is right, and *whenever any* man whatever really has another particular feeling towards an action; the action really is wrong.⁶

And,

If we take into account a second fact, it seems plainly to follow that the same action must be quite often both right and wrong. This second fact is merely the observed fact, that it seems difficult to deny, that, whatever pair of feelings as a single feeling we take, cases do occur in which two different men have opposite feelings towards the same action.⁷

These two passages are suggestive of the fact that on the matters of ethical disputes cognition or intuition or conviction is not the only thing but feeling and attitude have also some place in it.

Ethical Disagreement Consisting In Attitude

We have in the previous section tried to discuss a particular thesis on the matter of ethical disagreement, the fundamental assumption of which has been that an ethical disagreement is mainly a disagreement in belief. Almost all the cognitivists have taken side with this view but the non-cognitivists particularly those who adhere to some kind of strict emotivism have expressed the opinion that ethical disagreements are disagreement in attitude. In this connection we would like to discuss the stand- point of A. J. Ayer in his "Critique of Ethics and Theology" and "On the Analysis of Moral Judgement". Ayer is fully aware of the situations where two or more persons disagree on moral matters. But, negatively, such a disagreement cannot be said to have a factual basis. He is an emotivist, to use the term in a very wider sense, and according to him there is no factual or descriptive content of moral judgements. Ayer's own assertion "Thus if I say to someone, 'you acted wrongly in stealing that money,' 'I am not stating more than if I had simply said, 'you stole that money'. In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had, said 'you stole that money',⁸ is suggestive of the fact when two persons disagree on a moral matter, the disagreement is not a factual one consisting in a disagreement in belief. He further makes his stand-point affirmative when he says "The moral judgement expresses the attitude in the sense that it contributes to defining it".⁹ Since attitude is a defining characteristic of moral judgement, all ethical disagreements given in the form of different moral judgements must lie in a disagreement in attitude.

Ethical Disagreement : Dual In Nature

Under this caption we intend to discuss C.L. Stevenson's thesis on ethical disagreement. In this connection it is to be noted that Stevenson is fully aware of the two basically opposed points- of-view, the first treating disagreement to be a disagreement in belief and the second regarding it exclusively consisting in attitude. He is inclined towards the attitude theory, but is conscious of the fact that in the cases of ethical disputes or disagreements there is also some amount of disagreement in belief. He has, therefore, rejected the one sided view of cognitivists on the one hand, the extreme emotivists, on the other, and has said,

When ethical issues become controversial, they involve disagreement that is of a *dual* nature. There is almost inevitably disagreement in belief, which requires detailed, sensitive attention; but there is also disagreement in attitude. An analysis which seeks a full picture of ethics, in touch with practice, must be careful to recognize both factors, neither emphasizing the former to the exclusion of the latter, nor the latter to the exclusion of the former.¹⁰

C. L. Stevenson is of the view that various issues concerning ethical disagreement can be decided only on the basis of our observations of various situations in which disagreements occur. Generally, when we are confronted with situations of ethical disagreements we observe the presence of both kinds of disagreement viz. disagreement in belief and disagreement in attitude. In the proper estimation of the nature of disagreement both the factors must be taken into account. Certainly when two persons disagree on the ethical value or moral quality of an action or of a person, they have disagreement of belief as well as of attitude. None of them is ignorable. Suppose X says 'A is good' and Y says 'A is bad' in that case they are not only referring to different beliefs, but also they have different attitude regarding A. Actually, the situations of ethical disagreements are very complicated ones and this complication makes one examine the various pros and cons involved therein. Emphasizing first the disagreement in belief he says, "If we examine the concrete ethical problems that arise in daily life, we shall easily see that they have much to do with beliefs The beliefs that are relevant to determining the value of an object may be extremely complicated-no less than to the network of causes and effects in which the object lies. There can be no thought of marking of certain beliefs as ethically relevant, and certain others as ethically irrelevant".¹¹

Indeed, it is true that according to Stevenson ethical disagreements, generally have some elements of belief. But, they also contain the element of attitude. Emphasizing how agreement or disagreement in attitude is peculiarly found in ethical judgements of diverse nature, Stevenson has said, "Agreement and disagreement in attitude are so characteristic of ethics that their presence is felt even when judgements are relatively isolated, and do not lead to any overt discussion".¹²

Stevenson has made some generalization in regard to the nature of ethical disagreement, particularly its dual nature but does not completely rule out the

possibility of there being some ethical disagreements exclusively consisting in belief. His own words are. "Yet if the controversial aspects of ethics may involve disagreement in belief, and in ways that become very complicated, it must not be thought that they involve this kind of disagreement exclusively".¹³ But, apart from certain cases of ethical disagreement consisting in belief, the general notion, he believes is that ethical disagreements are of a dual character. They have the elements of both belief and attitude.

Although Stevenson has put forth his thesis on ethical disagreement emphasizing its dual nature, he has nevertheless deviated from his attitude theory by giving some special significance to attitude. Expression of this has been made in the form of granting attitude a fundamental role compared to belief in the cases of typically ethical disagreements. He has assigned two reasons for accepting attitude to be fundamental in ethical disagreement. Firstly, it is attitude which gives a definite ethical character to a disagreement. We distinguish an ethical disagreement from other kinds of disagreement only on the basis of presence of attitude in it, Stevenson has said, "It is disagreement in attitude, which imposes a characteristic type of organization on the beliefs that may serve indirectly to resolve it, that chiefly distinguished ethical issues from those of pure science".¹⁴ The second reason for accepting attitude as enjoying a fundamental character has also been assigned by him. He is of the view that, it is disagreement in attitude that decides the mode and workability of ethical arguments. What argument will be relevant to terminate an ethical disagreement, this is decided only by going into the elements of attitude in disagreement. Stevenson says, "Disagreement in attitude is the factor which gives the argument its fundamental unity and motivation. In the first place, it determines what beliefs will relevantly be discussed or tested; for only those beliefs which are likely to have a bearing on either party's attitudes will be a *propos*".¹⁵

Thus, we find that according to Stevenson ethical disagreements are though of a dual nature, yet disagreement in attitude is the fundamental factor in them.

Having explained C. L. Stevenson's view on ethical disagreements we have been serviceably placed with a comprehensive account of them. There are some more views on ethical disagreement, particularly one needs to be explained. According to still another view maintained by I. A. Richards, ethical

disagreements are disagreement in belief about attitude. Richard's conclusion has been in regard to any controversy on the normative questions, but this is equally applicable to ethical disagreements as well. He said, "We can now extend our definition. Any thing is valuable which will satisfy an appetency (i.e., desire, which may be unconscious) without involving the frustration of some equal or more important appetency". He further says, "The importance of an impulse (i.e., appetency or aversion) can be defined ... as the extent of the disturbance of other impulses in the individual's activities which the thwarting of the impulse involves".¹⁶ His two passages are very much suggestive of the fact that according to him, ethical disagreements are disagreements in belief about attitude. A somewhat similar point-of-view has been expressed by R. B. Perry in his book, *The General Theory of Value*.

In recent times a new trend in metaethics has been noticed. A particular group of metaethicists who preferred to be called prescriptivists viewed some metaethical problems not from the angle of meaning of the ethical terms but from the angle of their uses. J. L. Austin recognized the role of performative act in the speeches. And R. M. Hare, S. E. Toulmin and Abraham Edel tried to set a new direction to metaethical discourses and according to them the language of ethics is prescriptive in nature in so far as it aims to answer what should one do?, or its precise aim is to guide our choices. So far the role of prescriptive element in moral judgements is concerned Rudolf Carnap¹⁷ went to the extent that moral judgements are imperatives in a "grammatically misleading form." And R. M. Hare opined that moral judgements have descriptive element but this content does not constitute its real ethical nature, prescriptivity and universalizability are two marks of them. Moral judgement, though they are themselves not imperatives, entail some kind of imperatives. Now, in this light we can see R. M. Hare's view of ethical disagreements.

R. M. Hare is, to some extent, in agreement with C. L. Stevenson in assigning a dual character to ethical disagreements i.e. it has some elements of difference in regard to how a matter is to be described i.e., it involves some kind of disagreement in belief. R. M. Hare says, "moral judgements beside their function as prescriptions, have also a descriptive meaning".¹⁸ Both Stevenson and Hare agree in granting a secondary status to disagreements in belief in the cases of ethical disagreements. But, whereas, Stevenson has stuck to attitude theory or emotivism and has granted disagreement in attitude as enjoying a

supreme place in ethical disagreement. R. M. Hare, though he has not developed his view on ethical disagreement in the manner of Stevenson, is a critic of emotivism. If two persons disagree on a moral matter the disagreement naturally would assume the form of some disagreement in belief and also in regard to its imperative nature e.g. the judgement "One should not tell a lie" can be contrasted with other person's judgement that "One should sometime tell a lie". Here the two persons can be said to be in the state of disagreement. And they might be referring to different principles in accepting their point-of-view. The resulting disagreement would involve different commands.

My observation on the basis of the foregoing discussion is that ethical situations are so much complicated that one cannot sufficiently make any generalization in regard to ethical disagreement in the form that this or that alone is the factor wholly responsible for an ethical disagreement. Ethical disagreements have significance in the field of ethical methodology in view of the fact that they alone provide scope for use of various methods to terminate ethical disagreement and arrive at a point of mutual agreement.

NOTES

1. J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London, J. M. Dent & Sons' Ltd., 1936), p. 36.
2. J. Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford, the Clarendon Press, 1778), p. 4.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
4. 'G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Studies*, "The Conception of Intrinsic value" (London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922) p. 144.
5. C. L. Stevenson, *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (New York, Tudor publishing Company, 1952).
6. G. E. Moore, *Ethics* (London, Williams, and Margate, 1912) p. 91.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
8. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, (London, Victor, Gallacz, 1967) p. 107.
9. A. J. Ayer, "On the Analysis of Moral Judgements", *Philosophical Essays*, p. 238.

10. C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 11.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
16. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (Harcourt, Brace, 1924), pp. 48-51.
17. Rudolf Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (London, Kegan Paul, 1955).
18. R. M. Hare, "Ethics", in *Essays on the Moral Concepts*, (London, The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1972), p. 53.