CAN MORAL REASONING BE PURELY DEDUCTIVE ?

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I

The topic strikes at a problem which has been very controversial in contemporary ethical thoughts. The Aristotelian model of deduction, has to its credit wide acceptability and applicability. There is a widespread belief that if any reasoning is rigorously logical, it has to be deductive. But such a reasoning demands the fulfilment of certain necessary and basic conditions. Our problem, at present, is to see whether moral reasoning is capable of meeting those demands.

In order to do this, paper intends to proceed in and through the following stages. First, it would try to outline, in a very general way the basic features of a really deductive reasoning. That would porvide the basic tools for making our final assessment. Then, the paper would consider the question as to why such a problem has come to demand considerations? We shall notice that there have been explicit examples of some models of moral reasoning advanced by some prominent ethicists like G.E. Moore, R.M. Hare, A.J. Ayer, Toulmin, Baier and others who deliberately put the examples of moral reasoning in the form of deductive reasoning. For the sake of brevity, here we shall examine only G.E. Moore's model as a paradigm.

II

In a deductive model, the relation between premises and conclusion depends on rigorous rules of inferences. The premises and the conclusion are so related that once we accept the premises to be true, we have to accept the conclusion to be true, as well, and this is done not by the way of

our own choice but by the command of the rules of inferences. There is no room for any personal decision or choice in such a case. whether what is stated in the premises is materially true or not has no bearing on the validity or invalidity of the reasoning. An example of a model of deductive reasoning can be shown in this regard:

All Men are God.

I am a man.

Therefore, I am God.

In the above reasoning, though the premises are not actually true, the conclusion still follows logically from them. If the premises are true, the conclusion has to be true, that is all that validity requires. The above model of deductive reasoning is valid because it is done in accordance with the rules of inferences.

It is important to note that there is a distinction between validity and truth. In a valid reasoning the premises need not be true, it is only required that the conclusion logically follows from the premises. It means that if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true.

Hence, it can be said that a deductive reasoning can be either valid or invalid. The conclusion of a valid deductive reasoning is contained in its premises. It means that conclusion is deducible from the premises. A deductive reasoning is invalid only if it is shown that it is possible for some arguments with the same form to have true premises and a false conclusion. For instance:

All Men are mortal.

Aristotle is mortal.

Therefore, Aristotle is a man.

The above reasoning is invalid because the conclusion does not follow from the premises, although all the premises happen to be true.

III

Now we have to begin with G.E. Moore's account of moral reasoning. What we gather from the preface of his book *Principia Ethica*, it appears that he opts for the deductive model of reasoning. He attempts to determine the general nature of moral reasoning and then explicate the role which a

moral reasoning has to play in moral talks, conversations and sermons. This becomes clear from his observations given as under :

> "I have endeavoured to discover what are the fundamental Principles of ethical reasoning and the establishment of these principles, rather than of any conclusion which may be attained by their use, may be regarded as my main object"[1].

Further, in order to drive home the point he starts by posing a question:

> "...What is the nature of evidence, by which alone any ethical proposition can be proved or disproved, confirmed or rendered doubtful."[2]

And to meet the answer of the above question, he details the steps of his reasoning. He says that moral reasoning consists of a set of statements of both kinds, a statement regarding a self evident intuition, and a statement of causal relation. Its major premise is self-evident truth known as an intuition and its minor premise is such which states a causal relation. In other words, the minor premise provides a causal link between the premises and the conclusion. To prove the statement 'X is good', Moore argues thus,

Y is intrinsically good.

X causes Y.

Therefore, X is good.

The first premise of the above reasoning is a statement of intrinsic value and the second statement is causal in its nature. These two statements are a set of premises which entail the conclusion, "X is good", Thus, Moore seems to maintain the view that there is a logical relation between premises and the conclusion and the whole processes of reasoning is strictly governed by rigorous rules of inferences. Like a strict logician, Moore too, maintains that to accept the premises to be true and not to accept the conclusion to be true involves us into self contradiction. This gives us sufficient grounds to maintain that for G.E. Moore, reasoning applicable to moral pursuits is purely deductive in its nature.

IV

Thus, we have outlined in a general way, the basic features of a

deductive reasoning and then we have also given the example of an ethicist like G.E. Moore who is thinking that moral reasoning can be deductive in its nature. Now we have to see as to whether the nature of moral reasoning in general is able to stand to test demanded by the pursuers of the deductive model of reasoning? In order to see this, we shall have to analyse deeply the basic features of the nature of a genuinely moral reasoning.

It appears that the passage involved in the case of a moral reasoning in between the premises and the conclusion is somehow not as rigid as it is supposed to be in the case of usual deductive reasoning. One significant point of a moral reasoning is the presupposition of moral commitment. The acceptability of a moral judgement, say 'Z' becomes expedient only when it is given under the reference of a system of commitment. When X tries to convince Y to accept the judgement 'Z', he intends to show that when Y accepts a system of moral commitment, he is also committed to accept the judgement 'Z' provided 'Z' is a judgement belonging to that paritcular system. That is to say, to accept a system of commitment to be true and not to accept the judgement belonging to that very system is to become inconsistent. The relation between these two is also logical, but it is not as rigorous as that of the relation of entailment. To be committed to certain moral systems under one frame work is logically weak but not self contradictory as it happens to be in the case of deductive reasoning.

Moral commitments are generally expressed in the form of generalisations. Prof. Rajendra Prasad in his paper "Justification of Ethics" has rightly conceived that:

> "A maxim is more general than a singular judgement in the sense
> that the latter can be subsumed under it or treated as an
> exemplification of it"[3].

Thus, a maxim is more general than a singualr judgement in the sense that the latter can be subsumed under the former, whereas a moral principle cannot be subsumed under any singular judgement. This cannot be an instance of any moral judgement whatsoever. On the other hand, in order to justify a singular moral judgement, one has to show that it is an instance of a moral principle which the opponent is committed to accept. Thus, a moral reasoning has, as its constituents, some maxims, some singular

statement, and a statement of facts as their consequences. For example, suppose X gives this judgement to Y, 'The terrorists ought to be condemned for what they are doing in Jammu and Kashmir'. Now X may proceed to justify it by arguing thus:

i) their actions are against national integrity and solidarity.

ii) All actions which are against national integrity and solidarity ought to be condemned.

In the above reasoning ;(i)' states some facts '(ii)' expresses a maxim which is relevant to moral evaluation of such actions. The Judgement in question is justified on the ground that if one accepts '(i)' and '(ii)', then he is morally committed to accept the judgement in question and if he refuses to accept it, then his position apparently turns out to be inconsistent. This shows that the justification of a singular judgement necessarily involves a reference to the moral maxim or principle. It is important to note that this reference is not always explicitly made. Most of the time the maxim is left unmentioned. This is a special feature of a moral reasoning that it is generally enthymematic in its character.

However, one more specific character of a moral principle is that it is not as strict as the general propositions of formal logic. Axioms and principles of formal logic do not admit of any exception, whereas the axioms and principles of ethics do allow such exceptions. For instance, stealing is wrong is a moral principle and it does have some exception because in some specific situtaions an act of stealing may not be wrong. Hence, it is not logically inconsistent to say 'in most of the cases stealing is wrong' instead of saying that 'stealing is wrong'. In this context, Prof. Rajendra Prasad again emphasises.

> "It is because of the important role human decision plays in it that
> ethical reasoning becomes less rigorous than that of scientific
> reasoning. It is clearly not as rigorous as formal reasoning where
> decision plays (almost) no part."[4]

Thus, 'The element of decision' seems to play a very significant role in moral reasoning, whereas in deductive reasoning there is no room for decision making. For example, the statement 'fire generates heat' to which a scientific law 'heat causes expansion' is applicable. This law is so

precise that hardly it requires anybody to take a decision whether it is case of heat or not?

The notion of the heat used in the above example is more precise than that of the case of the theft referred in the moral law. This is the reason why a disagreement in moral discourse is not easily resolvable. Now since 'the element of decision' is an essential factor of a moral reasoning in it the relation between premises and conclusion cannot be that of entailment in the strict sense of the term. This line of thinking suggests yet another relevant point making out a difference between moral reasoning and a strictly deductive reasoning. For a deductive reasoning, examples are not at all relevant, the validity or the invalidity of the argument nowhere involves a reference to concrete facts, it is valid or invalid by dint of the very form of it. But contrary to this in moral reasoning, instances are invariably important and they have a role to play in determining the validity-invalidity of the reasoning.

Nevertheless, in spite of these differences, moral reasoning may be presented in a syllogistic form, although it has to be remembered that the relation between the premises and the conclusion is not as rigorous as in the case of a deductive reasoning. Some ethicists developed an appreciation towards the relation of entailment, hence, they attempted to introduce entailment relation in the model of moral reasoning. They feel that by doing so they would succeed in making moral reasoning scientific and thereby retaining a sort of a logical rigour in it. But this is a mistaken attempt based on improper understanding of the peculiar nature of moral reasoning. It seems that they are not able to appreciate fully the important and distinctive role that 'decision' has to play in moral reasoning.

Thus, in moral reasoning the relation between premises and conclusion is not as rigorous as it is in the case of deductive reasoning. In a deductive reasoning the inference is so strict and rigorous that it is not possible to accept the premises to be true and to deny the truthfulness of the conclusion. On the other, in case of moral reasoning, it would not be a contradiction to accept a moral rule 'everyone ought to keep one's promises' and a factual statement 'I promised something to my wife' but not to accept the judgement.' I ought to fulfil that promise to my wife'. Even though after a

good promise sometimes due to extraordinary situation one is not able to fulfil one's promise. Such situations are not rare in one's moral life. This shows that the specific character of a moral reasoning is not exactly similar to that of a deductive reasoning. Hence, any attempt to introduce the entailment relation in the model of moral reasoning is not proper. The discussions made above give us sufficient ground to conclude that the reasoning acceptable in morality cannot be purely deductive in its nature.

V

But, at this point, one important clarification has to be made that, 'the decision element' of moral reasoning does not distort its objectivity. A moral judgement is justified by its reference to a moral maxim or a principle. That gives to moral reasoning a sort of an objectivity and universality. Such a reasoning works among those who are committed to give credence to and to accept that particular law of morality or maxim. Now, everybody who accepts that particular law or the maxim cannot afford, without being inconsistent not to accept the judgement subsumed under it. The maxims referred express some moral commitments which are acceptable not only to one individual alone but also acceptable to all those who are the members of that particular society to which such commitments belong. Hence, moral reasoning becomes public and objective. Moral maxims are also authoritative on the ground that they are not creation of an individual alone but an outcome of their use during the long period of time. They are, in fact, handed down to us from generation to generation as a part of our social and cultural heritage.

Thus, we can conclude that although moral reasoning may be presented in a sysllogistic form but the relation between premises and conclusion cannot be that of entailment because 'the element of decision' seems to play very important role in it.

NOTES

1. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, (1965), Preface, ix...

2. *Ibid*, VIII,

3. Prof. Rajendra Prasad, "Justification in Ethics," *The Indian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. I, (1959) p. 6

4.   *Ibid*, p. 12

REFERENCES

1.   Beards More, *Moral Reasoning*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London.

2.   I. M. Copi, *Symbolic Logic*, Collier-Macmillan Publishing Co. London, (1979)