

ETHICAL INTUITIONISM

1. By Ethical Intuitionism I mean the view, like that of Moore, that (1) there is an object or a set of objects which are characterized as ethical; (2) the ethical characteristic or property which belongs to the said object or objects is of a unique kind, i. e., it is logically irreducible to any other kind of characteristic or property; and (3) our knowledge of this property, or our knowledge of the said object or objects *qua* possessing this property, is intuitive. I define intuition as a direct or immediate (non-mediate, non-inferential), but in no way a necessarily infallible, mode of apprehension.

2. Suppose, now, we say that we know intuitively that it is ethical, to use a Kantian mode of expression that, we regard people never simply as means but always at the same time as ends, not simply because they are useful to us in one way or another but because they may themselves have some worth-while qualities. Here it is frequently contended, in professional circles and also in circles not so professional, that this position leads to subjectivism in the following way : A may intuit as ethical that we regard people never simply as means but always at the same time as ends, but B may not do so or B may even so intuit its exact opposite; and in a situation of this kind there are no objective criteria available by which to settle the conflict between A and B, by which to decide whether A is right or B. One may even go a step further and argue that, on the given thesis, A may intuit as ethical at time t_1 that we regard people never simply as means but always at the same time as ends, but at time t_2 he may not do so or may even so intuit its exact opposite; and in that circumstance there are no objective criteria available by which to find out whether A was right at t_1 or at t_2 .

3. I directly or immediately apprehend, intuit, that collocation of colours and shapes in front of me. Why, generally speaking, is the charge of subjectivism, in the form or forms in which I have stated it in the previous section, not made against this intuition ? Are there any objective criteria available here ? And if so, what are these ? It is indeed the case that under certain more or less specifiable external and internal conditions,

such as those pertaining to light, location, position, mental and physical health, most of us would intuit that collocation of colours and shapes in front of us. But these are the conditions under which most of us *do*, and not those under which all of us *must* intuit that collocation of colours and shapes in front of us. If that is so, these conditions could not function as an objective *criterion* for there being, as a necessary objective ground for judging there to be, that collocation of colours and shapes over there. We would certainly transcend subjectivity of which I have talked in the preceding section and have a very vast amount of consensus, but we would not attain a universal and necessary agreement.

4. What if somebody did not intuit that collocation of colours and shapes over there, despite the fulfilment of those conditions under which a vast majority of people would intuit it? Are there objective criteria by means of which this difference could be overcome? To consider the dissenting person as only fit for mental asylum would be to decide a question of logic through majority vote. The question of logic is still not settled even if one argued, although I am not sure with how much justification, that all of us, and not just a very large number of us would intuit that collocation of colours and shapes over there under certain conditions. For we would still require, as I have already said by implication in section three, objective criteria, necessary objective grounds, and not simply the added force of general consensus, to deal with *possible* dissent.

5. What, if any, then, are the objective criteria with regard to our intuition of that collocation of colours and shapes over there, criteria through which *any* conflict concerning our intuition of the collocation in view could be resolved?

But would it not seem to be the case that there are indeed no objective criteria here, no objective grounds of our necessarily intuiting the object under discussion, no bases on which a conflict of intuitions in the given situation is bound to be resolved? And, further, would it not seem to be the case that what we have here is really nothing more than that all or most of us under certain conditions intuit the said object, i. e., what we have here is really nothing more than a more or less general

consensus (we have no objective criteria) ? Would it not seem to be the case, for example, that what we have here is really nothing more than this, that unless we are jaundiced or our vision is defective in some other way all or most of us apprehend that colour green and that colour red over there, unless we have even slightly altered our location and position all or most of us apprehend those green shapes against the background of that red shape over there, unless the light is fading away all or most of us apprehend just those shades and contours over there (we have no objective criteria) ? I cannot, I am afraid, help answering these questions in the affirmative.

6. Do we really not know intuitively that 'Every object is what it is' that 'If the two contradictories p and not- p are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive of a whole universe of discourse, then no object in that universe could be both p and not- p and every object in it must be either p or not- p ,' that 'If a certain property characterizes every member of a class, then that property characterizes any particular member of that class.' And if so, why is the charge of subjectivism, in the form or forms in which I have stated it in the second section above, not made against this intuition ? It can indeed be conceded here, as in the case of our intuition of that collocation of colours and shapes over there, that under certain more or less specifiable internal conditions, such as mental fitness, mental development, logical ability, all or most of us intuit the above-mentioned logical truths, i. e., that there is under certain conditions with our present intuition, as with the other intuition, a more or general consensus. But, again, as in the case of the other intuition, although there is more or less general consensus concerning our present intuition, there would seem to be no objective criteria to remove any actual or possible dissent about it.

7. In the foregoing I have used the term 'criterion' in the sense of 'necessary ground for judging that X', that, for example, somebody is in pain. It is clear that in this sense the only sorts of things which one may take as a criterion of X are (1) the meaning or definition of X, (2) that which analytically follows from the definition of X, a corollary of the definition of X, or (3) Y which is different from, but is necessarily

related to X, i. e., anything which is synthetically, but necessarily, related to X. It should have also already been noted that I mean by 'objective criterion' 'a necessary ground for both A and B, where A and B stand for any two actual or possible persons or sets of persons, for judging that X.'

A criterion, a *necessary* ground for judging that X, has to be distinguished from what one may call a symptom. A symptom may be defined as a *contingent* concomitant of an object, as something which generally accompanies, but is not bound to accompany, an object, like some particular sort of facial expression or some particular sort of cry which may accompany a person's being in pain, or the thunder which may accompany the actual or the expected falling of rain. It is needless to say that one could, and indeed, does also identify an object, also judge that X, on the basis of a symptom, but obviously not necessarily but only contingently.

I have been trying to argue that there seems to be nothing necessary available, whether in the form of definition or a corollary of definition or a necessary accompaniment of an object, on the ground of which both A and B could identify or judge that concurrence of colours and shapes over there or those logical truths which I have mentioned.

8. I have mentioned a physical truth and several logical truths which we may be said to intuit but for which there seem to be no objective criteria. There are undoubtedly many other physical and logical truths which we may be said to intuit but for which there seem to be no objective criteria. We may be said to intuit, for example, that blue expanse over our head, that loud bang quite close to us, that chill in our hands when we touch a slab of ice, that fragrance when we take a stroll in our garden at nightfall, or if a is equal to b then b is equal to a, that if a is equal to b and b is equal to c then a is equal to c, that the compound proposition 'p and q' is equal to the compound proposition 'q and p'; but for none of these would there seem to be any objective criteria.

Is there really, as it seems, no objective knowledge, knowledge for which there are objective criteria, of so many of the physical and logical truths some of which I have mentioned ?

And if there are, appearances notwithstanding, then what are they? And if there are not, would it not mean that one has in the fields of physical and logical knowledge, not seldom, to be satisfied with nothing better than a more or less general consensus? Or, is the much-acclaimed so-called objectivity in the fields of physical and logical knowledge, not infrequently, simply general agreement?

9. Is there really no ethical truth (or truths) which one may claim to intuit but with regard to which there is an objective criterion? And, again, is there really not even an ethical truth (or truths) which one may claim to intuit but with regard to one's intuition of which there is a more or less general consensus, such as there is with regard to one's intuition of some of the physical and logical truths?

Just as there seems to be no objective criterion about some of the physical and logical truths which one may be said to intuit, there seems to be no objective criterion about any ethical truth which one may claim to intuit. Thus, for example, if A (a person or a set of persons) claims to intuit that we ought to regard people not simply as means but also at the same time as ends, or that we ought to be trustworthy, but B (another person or set of persons) does not claim to do this or B even claims to intuit the exact opposite of what A claims to intuit, then, there seems to be no criterion available for settling the dispute between A and B.

There is little doubt that there are numerous ethical truths, such as those we find embodied in various social moral codes, about which there is a good deal of consensus. But it may be argued here, and I think rightly, that this consensus is a product of such factors as social conditioning. On the other hand, what we are looking for is whether there is a more or less general consensus about our *intuition* of any ethical truth, whether all or most of us *intuit* any ethical truth, say, under certain specifiable conditions, just as there are some physical and logical truths which all or most of us *intuit* under certain more or less specifiable conditions. As to the contention that our so-called ethical intuition may itself be a social or some such product, the answer is that our so-called physical and logical intui-

tions may also be social or some such products. However, I am assuming for the time being that there are physical and logical intuitions and there may be an ethical intuition.

10. In order to find an ethical object which one may claim to intuit but in respect of one's intuition of which there is a more or less general consensus, let me begin with taking an example from Moore, to function as an experiment. In his *Principia Ethica*, on pp. 83-84, Moore says, "Let us imagine one world exceedingly beautiful. Imagine it as beautiful as you can; put into it whatever on this earth you most admire—mountains, rivers, the sea; trees, and sunsets, stars and moon. Imagine these all combined in the most exquisite proportions, so that no one thing jars against another, but each contributes to increase the beauty of the whole. And then imagine the ugliest world you can possibly conceive. Imagine it simply one heap of filth, containing everything that is most disgusting to us, for whatever reason, and the whole, as far as may be, without one redeeming feature."

The question is : Given these two worlds, the beautiful world and the ugly world of our imagination, would all or most of us not, as it *seems* to me that we would, under certain more or less specifiable conditions such as mental fitness, mental development, capacity for ethical reflection, intuit the beautiful world as (ethically) worthy, and the ugly world as (ethically) unworthy, of realization, rather than intuit both the worlds as equally or even more or less worthy or unworthy of realization or both as equally non-worthy of realization, or intuit the ugly world as worthy, and the beautiful world as unworthy, of realization?

Let me mention a few more things, again to function as experiments, which, it *seems* to me, all or most of us under certain more or less specifiable conditions, would intuit as ethical : (1) 'Torturing innocent persons' (what Hitler did to the Jews); (2) 'Regarding people never simply as means but always at the same time as ends' (what is not done in cases of slavery and prostitution); (3) 'Not causing pain to or killing oneself or somebody else, unless doing so is a means to the existence, or is a part, of a larger good' (what is not observed in cases of masochism, sadism, and others where there is no further

good in view, in cases of suicide and murder); (4) 'Not telling a lie or speaking the truth, except when telling a lie or not speaking the truth leads to the existence of, or is an element in, a larger good' (which is not followed, again where there is no further good in view, in the case of deceit); (5) 'Being trustworthy' (what does not occur in the case of embezzlement).

11. But is it not possible that there are objective ethical truths, ethical truths for which there are objective criteria, which are not known intuitively? That is, is it not possible, in this sense, to escape Ethical Intuitionism altogether?

But, then, how are these so-called objective ethical truths known? Are they known deductively? That is, are they deduced from some non-ethical truths, like psychological, biological, sociological, metaphysical, or religious truths? But is not such a deduction, as will now be generally conceded, simply impossible? Does it not violate the Law of Identity and thus involve the Naturalistic Fallacy? Moreover, does it not turn a categorical ethical principle into a hypothetical one, make it subject to or conditional upon some or the other extrinsic, non-ethical, consideration?

Or, are the so-called objective ethical truths accepted on some ground other than that of knowledge? Are they simply taken for granted? If so, that would, admittedly, hardly be the way to counter an intuitive ethical theory, or, in more general terms, to contend in the battlefield of philosophical discussion.

Department of Philosophy
St. Stephen's College
Delhi - 110 007

R. K. Gupta

