

## JOTTINGS ON THE CHARACTERISTIC AND MUCH CRITICIZED ETHICAL POSITIONS OF KANT AND SPINOZA

Spinoza's main thesis that body and mind are parallel series, that everything on each side has a corresponding happening on the other, seems to make ethical action and judgements altogether impossible. For, since on the bodily side everything is predetermined, no freedom of will can possibly exist even in what we call our voluntary and moral life. According to Spinoza, while it is true that man is aware of some of his actions, he has not the capacity to change the course of action any more than a stone falling to the ground would have, if it became conscious. Perhaps, it could then, as we do, describe what happens to it and may feel or believe that some of its activity is subject to its own control. On that assumption, acts could be right or wrong, for they would be chosen. But in fact mere awareness cannot and does not change the course of action. Of course, in one sense, all acts are self-determined as the stone falls down because it is a stone and not a light thing like a piece of paper. If Spinoza literally held the view that awareness makes no difference to action, he would not have undertaken his Ethics which has the avowed purpose of helping people out of misery by explaining to them what in life is transitory and what is permanent. He certainly talks of the great power of passion which blinds men and encourages them to pursue trifling and transitory ends and be slaves of passion. But while he explains them in detail he also indicates how the power of reason and thought in various ways can *gradually* help one to get out of the slavery and work for more rational ends and lasting objectives. This can only mean that in some sense and to some degree freedom is available and there is some mutual interaction between mind and body as well as general parallelism. If we consider our common moral life, do we not realize the truth of what Spinoza states when he says that merely being aware of an activity does not change it? How long and strenuous we know is the road which a sinner has to travel before he becomes virtuous! It is not mere awareness of sin but something else, some special effort of the will is necessary to change over from the wrong to the right.

This does, in a sense, seem inconsistent with the Socratic doctrine—Virtue is knowledge, vice ignorance. But Socrates is right too if by knowledge we mean *full and deep* conviction. Socrates points out one aspect of the situation, Spinoza another. Already, both in Plato's description of virtue as the harmony between sense and reason and specially in Aristotle's definition of virtue as 'the *habit of choosing the mean*' we find that the Socratic doctrine is duly supplemented by the other aspects of the moral situation which are neglected in the Socratic maxim because Socrates is talking about the wise man and not of all who can reason and have some knowledge. As we are aware, the modern trend describes the moral judgement as a mere recommendation and the Humean view that the morally good is that which arouses an emotion of approval in the majority of human beings. Compared to these, Spinoza's view accords more authority and objectivity to the moral judgement only pointing out that mere idle awareness of a mental state (like mere wishes in the moral situation of desire, wish and will) by itself, will not bring about a practical transformation of it and the action ensuing from it. We are aware that even Aristotle describes virtue as a *habit of choosing the mean* and habit necessarily implies patient effort, to act up to and realize the awareness in action although after a while the action is performed with ease and becomes natural. On the whole I think while Spinoza seems to ignore the importance of knowledge in the moral situation, all that he really means is to warn us against overemphasizing it and so far as the common man is concerned this is a very valuable warning. We must also, unlike Broad, who synthesizes action, emotion and thought, give due importance to his notion of intellectual love and the very fact that the avowed purpose of his Ethics is to enable men to distinguish the transitory from the permanent for their miseries all result from their pursuit of the transient which naturally perishes. We must also remember that while he shows how passion governs and enslaves us his goal is freedom and the instrument he offers is general principles and an impersonal, rational approach to situations.

Let us now turn to the Kantian position in ethics. Kant holds the following positions : Our moral life is based on a Categorical Imperative which necessarily applies to all human beings. That

does not mean that every one follows it, in fact, very few do so to a satisfactory extent. On the other hand, it is always possible for them to follow it for 'ought' implies 'can'. This imperative applies to all our voluntary actions and is in that sense universal and has no exceptions. Actions are virtuous only if they are performed for the reason that it is one's duty, and for no other motive. If a good deed is performed only because one likes to perform it, it is not good in the moral sense. This does not bar inclination (as Aristotle says a man is truly virtuous if he likes to perform virtuous actions), but emphasizes that the motive force behind a right action ought to be the desire to do the right because it is right. Kant on the other hand is keenly aware that the human being also possesses a sensuous nature and tendency as a very important part of his being. Nevertheless according to Kant man is essentially and characteristically rational, and he can, if he tries, obey the imperative at all times (unless the individual is abnormal). Green later on showed how even cognitive life implies freedom, for a bundle of sensations is not knowledge until it is suitably organized by intellect and as a matter of fact for man except in sleep or in sedation due to medicines, there are never any mere sensations in his case, they implicitly imply, although to a less developed extent, both perception and/or even conception.

The Kantian moral position must necessarily be also understood along with what he calls the moral postulates. Any attempt to do so without including these is only to consider, part of his position and not the whole. Kant gave central importance to the Categorical Imperative because he thought that as in metaphysics so in Ethics (bundles of sensations without a self) the Humean position that the morally good is that which evokes in the vast majority of people an emotion of approval and thus tended to do away with the objectivity of moral experience and make the 'moral' quality of experience dependent on, as it were, a counting of votes, is unacceptable to Kant. If that is really the case, all moral progress is impossible for the orthodox will always be in the majority. Christ, Socrates and Gandhi would then be cranks and not moral prophets as we know they are.

The Kantian moral postulates are three : ( i ) Freedom, ( ii ) Immortality, ( iii ) Existence of God.

It will be readily seen that Freedom has to be assumed if we are to approve or disapprove of certain actions and pass moral judgement. We can only perform moral actions in one or the other concrete situation. There is really no way of escaping Kant's dictum that ought implies can, if we take a narrow view of 'can' we may on occasions say yes—I know I should have done it but I just couldn't (habit was too strong, the temptation to avoid to act was great). But it is clear on reflection that the word 'can' here is used narrowly and 'cannot' means here something like 'I find it difficult to,' 'I am disinclined to do,' or 'the flesh is weak'. The word 'ought' means, that if I choose I can do what the 'ought' indicates. It is true that even in determinist ethics it is said that it is possible to approve of an act in the sense that if it is desirable in general interest that people should speak the truth. I may legitimately try and create conditions in which they will be inclined to truth and thus ought comes very near 'is' and yet deserves to be encouraged and praised by people and vice versa. The advance in social science, the fuller realization of the fact that moral life is essentially social, the acceptance of law as systematization of moral activity at the lower but more general level, all these interesting and useful developments make our ethical discussions today more concrete and practical; but I do not think that we have ever succeeded in showing that 'ought' and 'is' mean the same thing or that at the other end 'ought' applies even to cases when 'can' is not available.

Since this question about the interrelationship of ought and can is raised in all theories of the moral standard and is not specially Kantian, let us pass on to the two other Kantian postulates of morality.

As regards immortality, Kant's position is that the human being is so constituted that he partakes of both sense and spirit. Since, however, spirituality is what distinguishes man from animals his aim has to be to realize it as fully as possible although this effort can never fully succeed, for man is not a disembodied soul and since the reason and sensibility of man are opposed to each other and thus his task is never ending and needs, and therefore, implies immortality. I do not think

that Kant is right in thus opposing sense and spirit and to me a notion of disembodied soul is invalid. But for the common man what Kant says is useful for encouraging him to pursue the moral path at all times, even if quite often in our experience Virtue is not rewarded with happiness or vice punished as it ought to be. Whatever its theoretical difficulties, it is undoubtedly true that we expect virtue to be rewarded, although we don't pursue virtue for any other end except to achieve virtue and in pursuance of the Categorical Imperative and for its own sake. This position means that although the pursuit of virtue must be disinterested—if the universe is rational, virtue and happiness should go together. When one asks for help from God—the universe or nature or society—one instinctively feels that one's hands must be clean. Although every one including the wicked wish for happiness they never do so because they are wicked, for they always seek to justify their departure from the conventional moral path, except when they are abnormal and vice sticks to them as a matter of mere mechanical habit — as something which they can't help.

For a similar reason Kant makes the existence of God one of the postulates of moral life. While it is true that sense and spirituality are fundamental constituents of man's nature and the moral task will always mean effort to subdue sense to spirituality and be never completed, it is reasonable to believe that God who has given man both these will sometime and somehow guarantee and bring about their harmony : God is thus required to make the moral life of man who has also sensibility ultimately harmonious as it ought to be in a rational world. Kant here does what the true man of religion also does in so far as while he is righteous because it is his duty, he also has a faith that the universe i. e. society and nature are ultimately on his side and that what he does is not ultimately wasted and is therefore not meaningless. As we know Russell and many others say that man has to be moral because he is a man although the universe (not society but nature) is quite indifferent to man's moral aspirations. Here again, Kant I think, is thinking of the common man and it must be admitted that the common man is virtuous because he feels that his

virtue will somehow and somewhere be rewarded through the inscrutable ways of providence.

To say that the Categorical Imperative is formal and abstract and has *no* content and that many good actions too cannot be made universal is not to understand that Kant is trying to correct a *common* mistake in moral life. Besides, any general knowledge by its very nature is abstract in a sense and when we talk of a law we assume the relevant content. As a matter of fact, in calling Freedom, Immortality and God as postulates of moral life, Kant keeps open the option that moral life may well be a universal human delusion and that what we call moral life is in itself nothing more than the interplay of atoms and is governed by strict necessity.

Both Spinoza and Kant are essentially interested in the common man and out of the entire complex moral situation emphasize the aspects which they feel are usually neglected. Spinoza is reacting to the Cartesian doctrine of interaction through the pineal gland of the brain and he points out that since on Descartes's own theory mind and body are different substances they cannot interact, for there is no common ground for them to interact. He may also have in mind the shallower view of the Socratic doctrine, Virtue is Knowledge. Kant is reacting to Hume, to the moral sense school and the utilitarians. The notion of making morality equivalent to what evokes an emotion of approval in the vast majority of persons (how then is reform possible?), or as something which appeals to the moral sense of man, or as that which is useful as being pleasant all tended to make morality subjective and hypothetical. He was also well aware of the fact that when men are allowed to make exceptions, they always make their own case a special one and exempt themselves from obeying the demands of conscience.

6/67, Lokmanya Nagar,  
Poona - 30

P. R. Damle