

The Sources of Moral Disquiet

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Disquiet in ethics, or moral philosophy, has its main sources (a) in an irreducibly subjective or personal element contained in moral judgement, (b) in a tension between virtue and happiness, and (c) in the nature of moral disagreement. It will be useful to consider each of these in turn.

(a) It is evident that people worry more often about the objectivity of morals than about the objectivity of fact. A statement about, say, the conditions on a certain planet, even if it cannot be verified, seems to them objective in the issues it raises, because although the human mind is involved in making the statement, it is not involved in what makes it true or false. Thus, what makes it true that there are mountains on the moon would hold even if the human species had never existed. Moreover, the same point applies to factual statements much greater in their complexity. For example, one cannot verify the theory of evolution as one can a simple statement in astronomy; nevertheless, everyone believes that what makes it true or false is independent of human views about it.

The term 'objective', no doubt, has many uses; but none is more fundamental than the one discerned above. My view is objectively true, when in holding it I am in contact with reality, when I am forced into believing it by reality itself. So long as I believe that of my view, I shall never be shaken free of it. It is of secondary importance whether I can get others to agree with me or whether I have reasons for my view. For many of my beliefs about the past, for example, I have no evidence at all. What I did on such-and-such an occasion may have had no witnesses and there may be no other record of it. Nevertheless, I am certain of what occurred. I am certain, in other words, that a correct explanation of my belief must in the end include the occurrence of what I believe. I am linked to that occurrence through my belief. So long as I acknowledge that bond I believe with certainty. On the other hand, about another of my beliefs, I may have reservations, even though I can support it with reasons that everyone else finds compelling. I might be unable to explain my reservations. Somehow or other I cannot quite acknowledge the bond which in the other case links me to an occurrence in the world. It is that bond which, in its fundamental sense, constitutes objective truth.

Now at first sight value judgements seem also to raise objective issues. For example, I should support my judgement that a painting is good by referring to objective features of the painting. But that is only at first sight.

A little reflection will give occasion for doubt. It will be idle to parade the arguments, since they are well known. It seems clear that people who approach a painting with different attitudes may agree about its objective features and still disagree about the value of the painting. What that suggests is that the human mind enters not simply into discovering whether something is good but into what *makes* it good. Value, in short, involves an element irreducibly subjective or personal. Thus nothing is sufficient to make a painting good, quite independently of the spectator, quite independently of the human mind. Why is that disquieting? Because we miss the contact with reality. We feel, if only vaguely, the absence of that bond which constitutes objective truth.

Now let us not be misled at this point by superficial argument. For example, it is often said, in defending the objectivity of value, that a value judgement is never justified by reference to one's own feelings. One's reason for calling a painting good is not that one feels it to be so. That, of course, is true. As a reason for calling a painting good one mentions some objective feature of the painting. So far, there appears no element irreducibly subjective. But that is because, so far, we move comparatively on the surface. The subjective element appears at a more fundamental level. As we have seen, the objective features you mention in judging a painting may be acknowledged by another who does not accept your judgement. In other words, the subjective element appears not at the level of citing reasons but at the level of what makes one thing rather than another a reason for you at all.

(b) We must now consider our second source of disquiet. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James tells of a wealthy man who lost his fortune through his own dissipation. In despair, he decided to end his life. Before doing so, however, he went for a last glimpse of his former estate. He then underwent a kind of conversion. He resolved to live, with the sole aim of regaining what he had lost. Apparently he succeeded in his aim. James says that he died an inveterate miser but one who had great wealth and power and the satisfaction of knowing that he had achieved everything he had worked for in life.

Here we have the case of one who in effect, or even explicitly, put aside moral considerations and pursued his own interest. We have no reason to suppose that he was dissatisfied with his decision. Now some philosophers have argued that there is a confusion in supposing that one can put aside moral considerations. Indeed they have argued that one cannot coherently even raise the question of whether one ought to be moral. Their argument is that a moral judgement expresses what one ought or ought not to do. For example, in saying that sadism is bad, one is expressing repugnance for sadism, saying, in effect, that one ought not to be sadistic. Therefore in asking whether one ought to be moral, one is asking whether one ought to do what one ought or ought not to do, which is incoherent.

Now that argument is fallacious. A little reflection will reveal that a person who asks whether one ought to be moral is not expressing but

mentioning moral judgement, is asking a question not within but about morality. A parallel case might elucidate the point. Consider the following question: What is good about fighting like Mike Tyson? A little reflection will reveal that that question is ambiguous between

1 Is Mike Tyson a good fighter? Is he better, for example, than the average brawler?

2 Granting that Mike Tyson is better than the average brawler, what is so good about that? Why bother with that distinction? Why bother about boxing at all?

Someone who replied to (2) by saying that Mike Tyson is far better than the average brawler would be saying what is true and would be giving a correct answer to (1). But his reply would be irrelevant to the questions raised. Question (2) raises an issue not *within* but *about* boxing. The one who raises it does not deny that, if one is interested, one may distinguish within boxing between the good and the bad; rather he questions whether the activity, for all that, should have a claim on one's interest. Now, similarly the one who questions whether he should be moral is not denying that we may distinguish within morality between what ought and ought not to be done; rather he questions whether the claims of morality should take precedence over other claims in his life.

Some philosophers, it is true, have denied that the above distinction, though valid in itself, can be applied to morality. Morality, they claim, is a special case. Here one can raise questions only within the activity, not about it. Their argument, roughly, is that moral considerations, by definition, are those which are of supreme importance. Being of supreme importance, they cannot be questioned, since there are no considerations that can outweigh them. That move is idle. By the moral one ordinarily means being honest or generous, considering the interests of others rather than one's own. The person who asks why he should be moral is asking, precisely, why he should not consider his own interest rather than those of others. His question cannot be evaded by defining the moral as what is of supreme importance. For on that definition, it would be legitimate to ask whether it is moral to pursue the interests of others. Might it not be of greater importance, and therefore truly moral, to pursue one's own?

In effect, the move is an evasion of the question. It is not likely, however, that those who employ it do so with that intent. What is more likely is that they are misled by the character of moral feelings. It is the character of such feelings to treat some things as more important than one's own interest. It may seem to follow that anyone who is not entirely devoid of moral feeling must treat considerations of self-interest as less important than moral considerations. But it does not in fact follow. Even though one has such feelings, one need not think moral considerations more important than considerations of self-interest. For one may decide on reflection that it is more important to follow self-interest than to give way to such feelings. How things appear when one has certain feelings need not be how they appear when, after reflection, one has taken all one's feelings into account.

The issue, then, is real. We may reflect for a moment on how implausible it is to suppose otherwise. Where is the mind, capable of sustained reflection, that has not raised the issue, on some occasion or other, if not explicitly then in effect? Who has not wondered, on some occasion, whether life is not easier for those who lack moral scruple? Who has not noticed how often the virtuous suffer and the evil flourish? The issue is raised at innumerable times and places. It enters into *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, said to be the oldest literary work in existence. It is a constant theme of the Psalms. It is the central issue in many of Plato's dialogues: and so on through the literature of the ages. It is one of those enigmas of life which most easily engage the reflective mind. Many have taken to philosophy specifically in the hope of obtaining an answer to it. One may reasonably hold that there is no satisfactory answer to the question, but hardly that there is no question to be answered.

Consider again the person mentioned by William James. Is there anything in wisdom or truth which can show him mistaken? From the moral point of view, his life was wrong or bad. But he knew that when he made his resolution, so it can hardly show him mistaken. In his resolution he was converted precisely from that point of view. In the factual sphere, what makes a man wrong is not that he fails to feel about things as you do; rather it is because he is in conflict with what is independent not simply of his view but of yours also. But now we are considering the claims of morality and self-interest. Is there anything in the world that answers to either point of view? Is one any closer to reality living in one way rather than in another?

The issue cannot be removed by conceptual elucidation, for it is real. One must either evade or confront it. If one confronts it, one must either accept or reject *thoroughgoing relativism*. On the relativist view, the conflict between morality and self-interest is basic. What counts as wise or reasonable will depend on how the conflict is resolved. Consequently the conflict itself cannot be resolved by reference to what is wise or reasonable; rather it is resolved for any given person according to which of his tendencies prevail. It is one urge against the other, the moral against the self-interested, neither tendency, independently of one's allegiance to it, being better than the other.

But is there an alternative to that view? We have seen that objectivity seems not to be involved in the very concept of value as it is in the concept of fact. But what then can count here as objectivity? What could be the equivalent in this sphere for the bond which in factual judgement links one through belief with the world? The bond cannot consist of correspondence with empirical occurrence. But is there an alternative model of objectivity? The very notion of objectivity in this sphere involves conceptual difficulty. Later we shall see if it can be overcome.

c) Our third source of disquiet is in moral disagreement. The nature of this disquiet must be considered with care, for it is often misunderstood. It is not disagreement in itself that is disquieting. Disagreement, no doubt, is unpleasant, at least to certain natures. But it is bearable. In itself it would not occasion that fundamental disquiet which occurs so often when people disagree in morals. To see the point, one has only to reflect that no one is disquieted at being unable to convince a child on some issue which passes outside his experience; nor at fundamental disagreement over some trivial issue of taste. The latter disagreement is not disquieting, just because the issue is trivial; the former, because the issue raised passes beyond the child's experience; the inability to convince him does not shake one's confidence in one's own opinion. As we have said, with regard to certainty of belief, what is fundamental is not the ability to win agreement or to produce reasons but the feeling that there is something independent of one's belief, which answers to it. Now what is disquieting about moral disagreement is that it has the tendency to undermine that very feeling. Often enough, in such disagreement, there seems nothing answering to my view which is not readily acknowledged by my opponent, so that nothing would seem to divide us, except our attitudes themselves, and these, it would seem, can be explained by reference to social and biological causes, factors which have nothing to do with wisdom or truth. With regard to wisdom and truth, indeed, the issue between us would seem entirely arbitrary. Moral disagreement, in short, is disquieting not in itself but in what it reveals. Moreover, it is disquieting not so much in what it reveals about one's opponent's view as in what it reveals about one's own.

Now the sources of disquiet, traced above, are evidently related, and they have in common that they would seem to reinforce the view we have termed thoroughgoing relativism. We must stress '*thoroughgoing*'. Some element of relativity will be present, it seems to me, in any coherent view of morality. For example, Plato's view is often taken as the paradigm case of objectivism. Yet Plato, it seems to me, clearly allowed for a certain relativity in moral view. He held that human systems of morality reflect a perfect goodness which lies at the centre of reality. But he also held that those systems reflect that goodness only imperfectly or approximately. Between one or the other of those systems, at least at certain points, there may be little or nothing to choose. Which is the better, may be an unanswerable question. Also, he emphasized that in this world good and evil are mixed. Often enough we have no clear choice between the good and the bad; sometimes we have to choose between courses each as bad as the other. Nevertheless, no one would describe Plato as a thoroughgoing relativist. This is because he evidently believed that the values borne by human attitudes reflected something more fundamental in reality than the attitudes that bear them. The question we must consider is whether this is a coherent conception.

The view I wish to present is that the only conception we can form of

objectivity in value is a religious one. It is only on a religious view that we can even conceive of value as forming an objective feature of reality. My reason for saying this is that there is, as we have seen, an irreducibly subjective or personal element in value. That, indeed, is why there can be no correspondence between value and empirical fact. For the empirical facts, the facts that appear in sense experience, consist largely of inert matter. On the Positivist view, the empirical facts are co-extensive with reality. That is why, on such a view, value is irreducibly subjective, why thoroughgoing relativism is inevitable. If there is to be objectivity in value, that view must be false. For human value, having an element essentially subjective or personal, can answer to something more fundamental in reality only if reality itself has a fundamental subjective or personal aspect. But it is hard to see how one can distinguish between believing that reality is fundamentally personal and believing in God. That is why it is only on a religious view that we can form a concept of objectivity in value.

The difficulty, of course, is to make the above reasoning appear plausible in the present climate of philosophical opinion. We must therefore attempt to give those influenced by the climate some pause, if not for agreement, then at least for reflection. The task is not as difficult as it may appear. For recently doubts have appeared about the Positivist model of Objectivity. Nagel, for example, has pointed out that such a model would make it difficult to account for *any* element of the subjective or personal. Now, as it happens, we are ourselves subjects or persons. We *know* that the subjective or personal is real. It follows that the Positivist model of objective reality cannot be adequate. The real and the objective (in that sense) cannot be co-extensive.

But there are still more powerful arguments. It seems to me easy to show that the Positivist model of objectivity is inadequate to explain even our knowledge of the empirical facts. In other words, *some* model of objectivity, other than the Positivist, is required, whatever the difficulties involved in framing it. To see the point, we must consider the striking parallels between disquiet about morality and disquiet about induction. As we shall see, the problems that arise in the two cases are almost identical in form and those who are relativists in the one case ought in consistency to be relativists in the other.

In discussing induction it is natural to refer to Hume's classic analysis. Unfortunately, in discussing Hume's analysis, one is confronted by issues of interpretation. I shall be forced to be somewhat dogmatic. For our purpose, this will not matter because the view I shall attribute to Hume will in any case stand on its own legs. In my view, if we are to understand Hume's analysis, we must see that he was not attempting to determine what causation is, rather he was attempting to clarify what *we* know about it. To adopt later terminology, he was attempting to clarify the *concept* of cause. Thus he proceeds not by disclosing hitherto unknown facts, but by taking an instance of causal

succession familiar in all its details to everyone. He asks us to consider the action of one billiard ball upon another. He wishes us to reflect on the relation between the two with the aim of determining what it is about it that makes us call it causal. His strategy is to describe the relation, as far as possible, in non-causal terms. In that way the causal element may be isolated. The causal will be that element which is left over when we can no longer describe the relation in non-causal terms. The puzzle is that nothing seems to be left over. So far as the empirical facts are concerned, non-causal terms suffice to describe the whole relation. The only approximation to causality that we can discern in the empirical facts is regularity or constant conjunction.

Now, it is commonly said that Hume identifies causality with regularity or constant conjunction. But that it seems to me is the most evident misrepresentation. What Hume says is that we can discover nothing better than regularity or constant conjunction in *the empirical facts*. So far as we confine ourselves to the facts revealed in sense experience, we can discern nothing beyond constant conjunction or regularity. But that, so far from concluding Hume's analysis, is, in a sense, its beginning. For Hume is clear in his own mind that constant conjunction or regularity is *not* what we mean by causality. Our notion of causality contains as an essential element the idea of necessity. Necessity is not equivalent to regular occurrence. The whole burden of Hume's analysis is to show how the idea of necessity arises, when it cannot be discerned in the empirical facts. The reason why Hume on this point is so grossly misunderstood is that he is approached on Positivist or Empiricist assumptions. It is assumed that the empirical facts are co-extensive with objective reality. Consequently, when Hume says that necessity cannot be discerned in the empirical facts, he is taken to be denying its existence. But that is not at all Hume's view.

What Hume concludes is that we cannot account for our idea of necessity without including an element irreducibly subjective or personal. He says that the idea of necessity arises from an *attitude* that we have towards the empirical facts, not from the empirical facts in themselves. When we see an event regularly following another, as in the case of the billiard balls, we *feel* that it must continue doing so. It is that attitude that gives rise to our *idea* of necessity.

It is essential to re-emphasise that Hume is *not* thereby treating our idea of necessity as a fiction. For example, he never denies—in fact, he affirms—that our feeling of necessity may have an objective base, that there may be features of reality that answer to it. His point is that such an objective base is not discerned in the empirical facts and we have no other means of determining what it might be. Consequently it cannot help us to explain how we arrive at the idea of necessity. To repeat: it is our *idea* of necessity that Hume seeks to elucidate. He never pretends to explain the fundamental nature of causation itself. Quite the contrary, he repeatedly affirms that we do not, perhaps cannot, know what that

might be.

Let us concentrate on the idea of causal necessity thus analysed. It arises not because there is anything answering to it in the empirical facts but through an attitude that is projected on those facts. The attitude itself, of course, is open to explanation by reference to the play of various causes, but these are factors which in themselves have no relation to wisdom or truth. There is, after all, no reason to suppose that the play of chance and blind causation should induce in human beings precisely the attitude needed to reveal the nature of objective reality. Is there not the most striking parallel between the concept of causal necessity and that of value? One may sum it up by saying that either concept might have been calculated to encourage the doctrine of thoroughgoing relativism. The significance of each would seem to be in expressing certain human attitudes which themselves answer to nothing further in nature. To put in another way: an emotive theory of induction is no less plausible than an emotive theory of ethics.

No philosopher, so far as I am aware, has in fact advocated an emotive theory of induction. Even relativists in ethics draw the line at induction. Why should that be? Presumably, because to extend relativism that far might bring about a *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole doctrine. No doubt there are difficulties of a conceptual kind in conceiving of an objective base to induction but if no such base exists then we lack all contact with objective reality. Causality is involved in the most elementary acquisitions of fact. The moment we pass beyond immediate subjective experience and affirm a physical occurrence we presuppose some element of causality. It seems we have to choose: we cannot both accept a Positivist model of objectivity and suppose that induction has an objective base. It seems more reasonable to reject the Positivist model of objectivity. But then it cannot be unreasonable to suppose an objective base for value more generally.

It is necessary, however, to pause at this point since there is a further striking parallel between the two cases that we have neglected to consider. As we have seen, philosophers have often attempted to eliminate disquiet about morality by arguing that we cannot even raise the question of why one ought to be moral. There is a parallel move in the case of induction. Thus it has often been argued that even to express disquiet about induction is to betray confusion. The argument in each case is identical in form. In the case of morality, it is argued that the moral is by definition what one ought to do; in the case of induction, it is argued that inductive procedures are by definition the ones it is reasonable to adopt. The move in either case is equally futile; and for the same reason. A worry that is suppressed in one form reappears in another. Thus the worry, in the case of induction, concerns the reliability of the procedures. Where is the guarantee that what has proved reliable in the past will prove reliable in the future? Now suppose someone argues that, in the realm of fact, it is reasonable by definition to trust in past

experience. The worry will not disappear. One will wonder what inducement one has in that area to trust in what is defined as reasonable.

Let us elucidate the point by drawing a contrast between inductive procedures and the procedures of mathematics. Both in his earlier and in his later work, Wittgenstein argued, very plausibly, that the attempt to provide a foundation for mathematics is misguided. He argued that worries about the nature of mathematics could be removed by clarifying mathematical procedures themselves. Some of his followers have attempted the same move in the case of induction. They have argued that disquiet about induction is a form of conceptual confusion which will be removed once inductive procedures are themselves clarified. But the move is fundamentally misconceived. What makes Wittgenstein's view plausible in the case of mathematics is precisely what would make it implausible in the case of induction. The point may be put by saying that in mathematics there is no difference between truth and validity. Having determined, in mathematics, what is validly drawn, one does not in addition have to wonder whether it is true. Wittgenstein himself put the point by saying that one works out a calculation on the blackboard; one does not have to check it by looking out of the window. The whole point about inductive procedures, however, is that they apply to the world, i.e. to what is independent of themselves. Indeed, as we have said, the plausibility of Wittgenstein's view depends directly on that contrast. It is because mathematical procedures are *not* in that respect like inductive procedures, because they do not apply in the same way to the world, that Wittgenstein's view is plausible. In physical science validity is not the same as truth. However validly we follow scientific procedure, our conclusion will still be false if nature turns out differently. It will therefore be evident that we have no reason to trust inductive procedures unless they have some objective base, some fundamental connection with the world that is independent of themselves. We should have no reason to trust them, because we should have no reason to suppose that they will enable us to predict what will occur in that world.

Now, it is important to see that value and induction have *not* been brought together in an arbitrary manner; the parallel between the two arises inevitably. If the Positivist model is correct, the world has evolved solely out of the accidental distributions of inert matter and is governed fundamentally by chance and blind causation. Value, then, is inevitably subjective; it is a mere accident of evolution and answers to nothing more fundamental in the nature of things. But reasoning, whether in science or elsewhere, is itself a species of value. To call one belief more reasonable than another is to evaluate those beliefs; it is to indicate which belief one *ought* to hold. Some principle of value is necessary in all reasoning. But if all such principles are accidental products of blind nature then principles of value in reasoning are as subjective as any principle of ethics.

The important question, then, is whether the Positivist model is

correct, whether the world is governed fundamentally by chance and blind causation. If the world is not so governed then presumably it has, at a fundamental level, something analogous to meaning or purpose. If that is so, principles of value, in science and ethics alike, will presumably have something akin to meaning or purpose in relation to nature more generally and will therefore have an objective base. Moreover, to see the world as having something akin to meaning or purpose seems equivalent to holding a religious view of the world.

It is worth noting that such a view would be opposed not to every form of relativism but only to relativism of a thoroughgoing kind. As we have seen, in describing Plato, some element of relativity in ethics seems inevitable. For example, it is at least conceivable, since man has a measure of free will, that someone might reject the good even if it answered to something fundamental in the world. He might rebel, as it were, against the nature of things. But there is a difference between allowing a measure of relativity and embracing relativism of the thoroughgoing kind. The thoroughgoing relativist holds that value reflects nothing but human attitude. The view we are considering is the opposite of that. It supposes that the good answers to something fundamental in nature. If that were so, thoroughgoing relativism would be false. Indeed, the only attitude to approximate to it would be that of the man who rejected the good, since it is his attitude which answers to nothing more fundamental in the world.

Some philosophers who hold a non-religious view of the world are also, with regard to value, thoroughgoing relativists. Their position has the virtue of consistency (though one may wonder why their relativism stops short at value). But there are a number of philosophers who hold a non-religious view of the world and also hold that values are objective. In the present century, G.E. Moore is an obvious example, but there are innumerable others. Now, the argument of this paper is that they are deluded. It is not simply that on a non-religious view one should hold that values are not objective. Within that view of the world, one cannot even frame a coherent model of what would count as objective value. This is not a profession of religious faith. It is a statement which is purely philosophical or logical. Accepting it does not in itself commit one to religious belief. One may still hold that religion is mistaken or confused. But then, in consistency, one should adopt thoroughgoing relativism.