

CAN THE DIVERGENCE OF ETHICAL  
JUDGEMENTS BE RECONCILED  
WITH THE EXISTENCE OF AN  
ABSOLUTE STANDARD OF MORALITY?

---

When we come to ask the question: ‘How far are ethical judgements objective?’ – ‘How far’, that is to say, ‘is their validity independent of the particular person and time and place which are involved in their pronouncement?’ – the first fact which is bound to strike us is the divergence of human ethical judgements. There is no question that various men at various times have given different answers to the same moral questions; and this difference cannot be sufficiently accounted for by the fact that no set of circumstances ever recurs exactly, is ever identical with any other set of circumstances, but presupposes that the persons judging were, consciously or unconsciously, using opposed criteria of judgement, had different ethical standards before their minds.

Nor does this difference occur in practical morality only: it cannot, that is, be supposed that though the ethical standard of all moral agents was always the same, they quarrelled merely about the practical means of achieving what all agreed to be their sole object as moral agents, and their differences arose, therefore, out of sheer ignorance of actual circumstances – some knew of means of which other were ignorant – and if all men were omniscient, or even if they all possessed exactly the same stock of knowledge, there would be complete agreement between them as to what is right, what is good, and what human duty is.

Anyone who seriously urges this is simply wrong: it is plain that it is possible that two men faced with the same set of external circumstances, the same problem, possessed of the same knowledge of the non-ethical nature and consequences of any act they may commit, may yet differ in their moral judgement; and if it is then averred that the difference arises out of their essential dissimilarity – out of the difference of the lives they have led, the

## DIVERGENCE OF ETHICAL JUDGEMENTS

experiences they have had, and consequently differences of character – and that this difference moreover cannot be surmounted, then it is alleged that we have robbed the ethical judgement of all objective validity, we have committed ourselves to pure unphilosophic intuitionism, as it is called, which tells us that no absolute standards or criteria exist, that each man intuits his own course of conduct, that the individual conscience is supreme in all acts of judgement, and that to assert, in the interests of ethics, that it must or does conform to an objective standard is simply to cut across the psychological fact that it does not and cannot do so. And this is a view held by philosophers of distinction: Hume seems to believe something of the sort, and Höffding, for instance, regards the value judgement, whether ethical or aesthetic, as a simple feeling arising largely from sympathy,<sup>1</sup> and admits that thereby he throws away all possibility of any objectivity in such judgements.

Yet this is an eminently unsatisfactory position if there is to be moral philosophy at all. If, that is to say, we desire to discover the truth about ethical judgements, and find out which are valid and which are not, we cannot dispense with an objective moral criterion: there is every difference in the world between non-moral and moral judgements in this respect. When A says that he likes coffee black and B declares that he prefers it white, both statements may be true. But if A declares that an act is right which B declares to be wrong, either one or the other must be mistaken, because they have made contrary assertions about the same thing. The whole point of saying that an act is right is to assert thereby that it is, in itself, or as a means, right independently of the person who asserts and of his private tastes and idiosyncrasies: this resembles not aesthetics but mathematics. What A wishes to say is that, granted certain premisses, namely that ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are real, and predicable of acts, such acts are right.

When therefore we observe that ethical judgements collide, we must reject some and accept others. And this can be done only by discovering some common quality which the valid judgements, and they alone, possess. When we test particular ethical judgements by means of this quality – which was itself derived

<sup>1</sup> *Ethik* 41, 72 [unchecked: presumably a citation from Harald Höffding, *Ethik: eine Darstellung der ethischen Prinzipien und deren Anwendung auf besondere Lebensverhältnisse* (Leipzig, 1901)].

#### DIVERGENCE OF ETHICAL JUDGEMENTS

from a comparison of particulars and is abstracted from them – we obtain the ethical criterion. It does not, for the moment, matter what this criterion is: it may be contained in the judgement of the best and wisest men, or in the principle of the common good, or in anything whatever, for we must possess the general idea of good to know what is meant by saying that some men are the best and wisest, or that there is such a thing as the common good. The important point is that we must have a criterion: the very kernel of our moral conviction is that there is something which every rational being, in so far as he is rational, must recognise as intrinsically right, that this something must be the same for all men under the same conditions and cannot be dependent on the subjective caprice of a particular man.

It is, no doubt, perfectly true that when we actually form our ethical judgements we do not normally ask ourselves what is the absolute moral standard, and then conscientiously apply it to the particular case, and so act; our moral judgement is formed, as it were, immediately, and when we say, for example, ‘This is our duty’, and are interrogated as to why we said so, if we are honest we reply that it was direct inspection of circumstances that decided us to say so. The act we pronounced to be our duty seemed to possess a characteristic which we are conscious of without going through any kind of process of reflection or explicit reasoning. But this actually proves nothing against the moral standard: the process described is purely psychological; it illustrates, that is to say, how we think, what is before our mind when we say something. Ethically there was still an implicit subsumption of the particular case under a general principle. Action may have been intuitively reached, which proves, Bradley would put it, only that the criterion was *in* the mind but not *before* it. Such judgements of duty or right are not self-evident and cannot be taken as ethical premisses, since they are capable of being confirmed or refuted by an investigation of causes and effects; no doubt some of our immediate intuitions are true, but since what conscience tells us is that certain actions will produce the greatest sum of good possible for us to achieve, reasons can be produced to show the dictates of the conscience to be true or false.

What this proves is that those intuitionist theories which declare that we have immediate intuitions not only of what is good in itself (with which we are inclined to agree), but also of what is our duty in particular circumstances, and that this immediate

#### DIVERGENCE OF ETHICAL JUDGEMENTS

intuition is, as it were, self-contained, and rests on no rational basis, but is something like, or is identical with, feeling, and uses reason as the best, most accurate vehicle of expression, and therefore is delivered in the form of a judgement – these theories must remain the private opinions of their authors, which add nothing whatever to moral philosophy but an improbable hypothesis, which, if its authors stick stubbornly enough to all its implications, and in its name contradict normal human experience, cannot be formally refuted. The number of such hypotheses is potentially infinite, but because they rest on no universal basis of human experience, they are of no value to philosophy.

What therefore emerges is that most rational human beings act on the assumption that there is a moral standard not relative to them, but absolute, so that the laws inferable from it are binding on all men. This of course does not prove that such a standard exists, but at any rate it lends probability to that view. The objection that if it existed particular judgements would not diverge and contradict each other as they do is really not very strong: self-evident things are not always evident to everyone, and there is such a thing as conversion from erroneous views by education, and gradual ascending stages of moral illumination. When we hear that there are savages who can count only up to 15, after which they call every quantity by one symbol, we do not raise the problem of whether or not the resulting arithmetic can be valid, because of this discrepancy of views: we regard the possibility of the existence of 16 as opposed to 100 apples as sufficiently self-evident not to require a formal proof. And if it be objected that the divergency in the ethical sphere is far more prevalent and extreme than in the region of pure science, we can answer only that, firstly, it must be admitted – and this, we believe, the sternest rationalists would confess – that our moral judgements are partly dependent on irrational feelings and emotions with which we do naturally regard various kinds of conduct, but this cannot be the sole test of moral approval or disapproval. The conscience of the individual is not infallible, mistakes are liable to be made in ethics just as in any other science: the objectivity and absolutism of the moral standard does not mean that the individual is infallible, or that an entire human society, if it reached a consensus of opinion, is infallible, whatever Hegel may say of the morality of conforming to the ethos of one's people. All that the assumption implies is that if I *have* judged rightly, then, if you contradict my judgement, you

#### DIVERGENCE OF ETHICAL JUDGEMENTS

are wrong. Whether I am right and how I can find out in particular cases is another and far more hopeless question. For whatever your criterion and whatever your standard, when you come to consider its application in practical matters, you are bound to find that to do so perfectly is impossible. You may be perfectly certain of your motive but you cannot be certain of the consequences of your act. Since even prediction of probable results extends into a very small portion of time and not into the infinite future, and the ultimate results you will never know at all, there is no possibility whatever of applying your criterion and being certain that what you have done is right. You may be sure that you have acted morally, acted, that is to say, under the impression that the results of your action will lead to things good in themselves, but you can never, because you are fallible and your knowledge of the universe is absurdly small, be sure that you have applied your criterion with any measure of correctness.

That, of course, is a limitation of human beings, which proves only that moral standards and criteria are of hardly any use in private life: which may be a fact sad in itself, but it does not dispose of the entirely different fact, which is quite independent of practical issues, that there is such a thing as an absolute ethical criterion without which nothing could be validly pronounced right or wrong, good or bad; the fact that even with it you cannot predicate absolute rightness of any particular, actual action, but only of hypothetical actions, does not alter the case at all.

© *The Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust 2004*

**Posted 20 January 2004**