CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ethics represents a search for cogency in one’s beliefs of good life and right conduct. A person, at various times, finds oneself in a situation of genuine doubt concerning what is right and what is wrong. This doubt is partly due to ignorance of the facts on the basis of which one is to reach a decision and partly due to questioning the very meaning, applicability or acceptability of the standard by which one is to be guided in making choices.

Moral values evolve in a society when its members acknowledge the requirement of peaceful co-existence. But when some serious challenge arises to accustomed ways of thinking and behavior patterns, the search for a standard of morality is instituted. The moral training of a child is a process of habituation in accepted conventions of the social group to which he belongs and in which he participates. However, the customary moral beliefs are very often exceedingly vague, rigid and inconsistent. Due to rigidity, they are incapable of applying to novel circumstances and break down under the slightest scrutiny or critical analysis. Moreover, there is no rational basis of choice among the diverse customs of different groups. These difficulties raise various questions, such as: What is one’s moral duty? What is it to lead a good human life? How to decide whether a particular action is morally right or wrong? Is the standard of moral judgment subjective or objective, internal or external? Do the values emerge from the transcendental source?

The above questions of morality are generally answered on the basis of personal preference (individual opinion) or reflections of majority will. A common tendency of resolving the moral question by appealing to the moral authority is also prevalent. This is an assumption that there is someone who is never mistaken when it comes to judge something as morally right or wrong. The religions of the world have long ago regarded this moral authority as God. But whether God exists is the most controversial question of philosophy, and to rest questions of right and
wrong on what a supposed God says is already to base morality on an intellectually unsettled premise. But howsoever unsettled the premise is, historically speaking, some supra-sensible entity as a moral authority is the oldest conceivable foundation of morality. The above reflections have given rise to different sets of principles, known as theories of moral standard.

Most of the theories of moral standard provide a general framework within which a particular moral issue or a case can be tested. Values represent a transition from what is desired to what is desirable through the medium of ‘what is generally considered as desirable’. I would like to call this approach of “judging something under a settled paradigm and trying to discuss every moral issue within that paradigm”, an ‘Objective Approach’ or ‘Theorist’s Approach’ to morality. These theories are developed with the conviction that in all moral decisions we constantly conform to general principles. There is rarely any moral decision in which one or the other general principle is not involved. The intelligible view of morality is not possible unless it is objective. Any rule, principle, law or standard is obviously objective. Right is justified in terms of generally recognized claims, built in reference to universality. The subjective principle of action, in order to be moral, must meet the requirements of an objective rational principle. It must answer the question how a self could morally reach out to the rest of mankind and treat the latter impartially and sympathetically. These theories of moral standard appear to have contributed immensely in the development of moral philosophy.

However, a moral theory provides a fixed framework to resolve all kinds of moral dilemmas and reduce morality to a closed system. The moral theory often overlooks that each moral issue differs from the other in content as well as in context. The uniqueness of a particular situation demands unique moral treatment. As human beings are at the center of moral decision-making, one’s being authentic and having one’s own sense of moral judgment play vital role in the decision-process. Therefore, the principles of morality cannot be fixed and closed. Moral discourse needs to
be open-ended in order to accommodate and address moral dilemmas that intrigue our minds and bewilder our conscience. The very belief that an individual is answerable to his own conscience for his acts and decisions, rather than to any given doctrine or principle, is the Subjective Approach towards morality.

The above approach sometimes becomes too extreme and drifts towards moral relativism, where the religious and moral questions, the question about God, ‘the just’ and the virtuous become matters of private opinion and conflicting political convictions. Amidst these conflicting convictions, there is no means of making distinction between the right and the wrong. When moral agents are released onto the landscape of moral discourse as disconnected and ‘commodified’ atoms, an urgent need of philosophical reflection on morality arises. The present work, therefore, proposes to discuss the problematique of subjective and objective approaches to morality and invokes Kierkegaard and Kant to address this concern.

The seed of the subjective approach to moral philosophizing is found in the writings of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard and in his ethics of authentic existence, developed as Existential Ethics. In Kierkegaard, the subject becomes the nucleus of moral judgment. Accountability to oneself, authenticity, owning the responsibility in contradistinction to mechanically following rules and customs mark the fundamental characteristics of existential ethics.

The writings of Kierkegaard play such a formative role in the emergence of Existentialism that Kierkegaard is regarded as the ‘father of Existentialism’. It is also because of his influence on such writers as Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and many others. Mostly unknown to the world outside Denmark during his lifetime, Kierkegaard becomes one of the most influential thinkers of his time in the last century. His critique of modern society becomes a dialogue partner for a variety of discourses that can be called Critical Social Theory and his critique of reason is a precursor to the postmodernist’s assault on
The Postmodernists see him as contravening with modernity's overindulgence with instrumental rationality. Kierkegaard revolts against abstract objectivism and emphasizes intensively the concrete subjective existence. He holds that existence cannot be grasped as a mere object of thought, it has to be understood through concrete experiences wherein one is aware of oneself as an existential being and is committed and engaged to this experience. These insights enable Kierkegaard to make a new approach to the problems of ethics. For him, there cannot be a hierarchical order of functions and duties of human life. The individual is the bearer of all values. Kierkegaard interprets ethics in terms of moral life. Since he is not giving any fixed hierarchical moral theory, he is using the words 'ethics' and 'morality' interchangeably. For him, Morality is not superimposed upon the individual; it is the part of his being, as his own creation.

Kierkegaard puts forth the problems of ethics in a new perspective, challenging all the traditional standpoints. His fundamental thesis is presented in sharp contrast to conventional morality. His ethics can be called an "Ethics of openness" which does not usher in moral principles fixed in advance. Consequently, Kierkegaard has not tackled many of the ethical problems analyzed by ethical thinkers; rather he sees them differently. Kierkegaard’s authorship comprises different normative points of views and disciplinary subject matters including works of psychology, theology, satirical prefaces, philosophical ‘scraps’ and ‘postscripts’, literary reviews, edifying discourses and dialogical method of indirect communication. These are directed to deepen the reader’s subjective passionate engagement with existential issues.

Kierkegaard’s moral philosophy does not rest upon any rational metaphysical presuppositions. The aim of philosophy, for him, is not the achievement of self-enclosed system of ideas but to awaken oneself to his own authentic existence. He sows the seeds of anti-deterministic and

---

subjective perspective to morality. The contribution of Kierkegaard's ethics is not merely negative; it does not merely propound a criticism of traditional thought, but it has something positive to offer by way of a novel interpretation of the problem of freedom, value and existence. This kind of ethics can also be called 'situation ethics' in which the course of action is in accordance with the unique situation in which the agent finds himself. It is individual's choice and freedom that gives meaning to the situation.

Kierkegaard criticizes the objectivistic theories of value by developing the view that the choice of value is subjective. According to him, value cannot be justified in terms of rational objective methods. In case of value conflicts, it is not possible to have an objective criterion for articulating value profiles. Values are neither the structures of objects nor are they mental events. Kierkegaard avoids both naturalistic and idealistic interpretations of value, because, naturalism equates normative assertions to factual ones and idealism reduces values to fixed patterns. For Kierkegaard, values cannot be reduced to facts. They are also not transcendent i.e., they are not given independent of historicity. The latter is appropriated by subjectivity. Consequently, there is no a-priori 'ought' in Existential Ethics.

Kierkegaard's identification of truth with subjectivity is the undercurrent in his entire gamut of philosophical reflections. "Subjectivity", in general, means "state of the knower". However, Kierkegaard uses this concept to connote the self-consciously existing concrete subject - the individual. Subjectivity is not simply the introspection of psychology but a much deeper and dynamic abandoning of the objective attitude. It consists in concentrating and intensifying inner conscious existence in its diverse acts - mainly volitions and decisions. Thus, 'subjectivity' in Kierkegaard is more an ethical and spiritual subjectivity. For Kierkegaard, one should probe into one's subjectivity and discover the truth of one's being and his authentic role in life. This creative process gives rise to fresh insight. Becoming subjective is a creative quest of man's authentic being i.e. to become aware of the
innermost depth of one's individuality. Submerging in collectivity is an
inauthentic existence, a state of "being outside oneself."

To be authentic is to 'choose oneself'. This "choosing oneself" means
unconditioned choice and owning the responsibility for what one chooses.
A free action is deliberately chosen by the individual and is not measured
by any external criterion. The moral value of choice does not lie in
consequences, but in its intention.

The individual has infinite possibilities, which are incapable of even
being comprehended much less rationally predicted. These possibilities
imply a future and consequently there is a feeling of 'dread'. According to
Kierkegaard, "Dread is the possibility of freedom". Only a free individual
experiences such possibilities, for the question of possibilities does not
arise if there is fatalism and everything is already fixed. This view of
morality imparts a good deed of responsibility to the individual who is to
act in accordance with the honest and inner urge that impels him to act.
The feeling of dread is the source of existential courage and strength, not
of weakness. It becomes weakness if one runs away from it. For
Kierkegaard, dread itself prepares us for authentic action. It is like a fire,
which consumes all soothing delusions and excuses and leaves man
facing himself and the actual situation.

According to Kierkegaard, the ability of a man to stand-alone
(against all odds) is the true freedom and is the basis of all morality. He
believes in living as an individual. For, in eternity, each shall render
account as an individual. The king shall render account as an individual
and so the beggar. Kierkegaard calls this accounting before eternity, "the
voice of conscience". However, in the temporal order, the voice of
conscience becomes merely one voice among many and overruled by the
majority. But "in eternity, conscience is the only voice that is heard".

---

4 Ibid.
According to Kierkegaard, the highest good is not to be discovered in the outer world but by means of self-penetration of the individual. Free will of the subject is the basis of all morality. 'Objectivity' demands that truth depends on the verdict of others or external framework, which Kierkegaard calls "spiritual suicide". Any vicious action like willful murder etc is not a matter of fact. There are only certain emotions, motives, volitions, and thoughts, which can be found in our own breast, and there is a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in us, towards this action.

The specificity and uniqueness of subjectivity is through freedom. Existentially, the individual is free from both psychological determinism and objective social order. Freedom exists as volition. Man's circumstances are given to him but his attitudes and perspectives for confronting them are entirely his own. Freedom achieves its meaning through resolute action and fails to achieve it through indecision and irresolution. The resoluteness implies unconditionality of choice. The truth of resolution cannot be judged from the consequences, for hostile consequences in no way disvalue it.

The proper characterization of freedom is to be found in the situation. Freedom is unconditioned choice of the self i.e. it consists in choosing irrespective of any pre-conceived formulae. Man is in charge of himself and should be ready to take the blame or credit for his actions. An authentic person is ready to bear the responsibility of the consequences of his choice, while an inauthentic person is undecided and unsure of himself. The three stages of existence – the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious in Kierkegaard’s philosophy are nothing but steps towards realization of freedom.

The objective approach to moral philosophizing is based on the conviction that the subjective principle of action can be justified on an objective rational anvil alone. This very conviction has led most of the theories of moral standard to search for objectivity in one's claims to answer any moral problem. This search for objectivity is believed to be epitomized by Kant in his theory of the Categorical Imperative. However,
the present work endeavors to show that Kant's concept of the *Categorical Imperative* has much more to offer than the oversimplified account of his universalizability principle by his commentators and critics. It proposes to bring forth the subjective elements in the moral philosophy of Kant. The present work proposes that in its spirit, there is hardly any difference between the subjective and the objective approaches to morality, even though the same cannot be claimed in method and content.

Philosophy, for Kant, is said to contain "the principles of the rational cognition that concepts afford us of things." As concepts can 'afford' only the phenomena, his philosophy can be summarized in the following dictum – "**Understanding maketh nature out of the materials it does not maketh.**" Our knowledge of the external world is limited to our capacity to know them, but their existence does not depend upon our knowledge of them. Kant extends this 'epistemic humility' and human finitude to the realm of morality and still manages to show that moral will is autonomous.

According to Kant, the use of reason is theoretical in the philosophy of nature and it is practical in the philosophy of moral. Whenever we think about empirical laws of nature, we have to observe the laws of thinking which are the laws of logic or rules of language. Kant believes that the human faculties of perception, feeling, conception, judgment and reason display a systematic or organic unity. These faculties make sense only in relation to their contribution to the whole. This shaping power of the human mind, which unifies the branches of knowledge, is at the center of Kant's philosophy.

Kant tries to establish that at least in terms of fundamental principles, all scientific disciplines rest on core assumptions that reflect the way that our mind works to produce knowledge. He insists that it is the same reason that enables us to make sense of sensory data in scientific theories that guide our moral deliberations and create our

---

political institutions and laws. The thought, action, art and science are
intimately bound with the creative activities of the human faculties.
Perhaps, for this reason, Kant proceeds to propound his critical
philosophy only after giving a detailed account of the pure reason i.e.
limitations of human faculties.

The Critical Philosophy of Kant is based upon the conviction that
human beings could acquire neither knowledge nor moral wisdom simply
by getting information about the passing show of objects and human
events through their various senses. For knowledge and morality to be
possible, human mental faculties are to be active in interpreting sensory
data and in judging moral rightness. The good is to be found not without
but within the acting personality itself. Neither experience nor illustrations
make an action good. Every custom, examples and empirically given ideal
must first be tested and judged. Hence a theological and psychological
basis for ethics is alike impossible. Duty arises neither from authority nor
from experience. Hence Kant searches for a motive of morality and finds it
in goodwill.

According to Kant, goodwill is the only jewel, which shines in its
own light and the value or worth of action depends upon the goodwill or
the motive with which it is done and not upon the consequence of the
action. Here the motivating cause is the faith in the moral law. A will is
good not because of its effects but in itself and for itself. Goodwill follows
the Categorical Imperative and is not to be actuated by an inclination,
feeling or desire for an end or consequence. It is prompted by pure respect
for the moral law. In his Critique of Practical Reason, Kant says,

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration
and awe, the more often and the more steadily we meditate upon
them: the starry firmament above and the moral law within.6

6 Kant, The Critique of Practical Reason, in Great Books of the Western World, vol.42, ed. R. M. Hutchins,
The admiration and awe, which Kant talks about, definitely presupposes the individual at the center of moral philosophizing. Nevertheless, Kant’s formulation of the Moral Law or the *Categorical Imperative* in the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* is a formal principle of ethical decision-making. It is founded on the view that the predominating element in the self is reason, which is opposed to desire or inclination. It asserts itself in the authoritative demands of the moral imperative. Further when he says that conscience imposes moral law upon itself, Kant is bringing the individual back to the center of his moral theory.

At the heart of Kant’s moral theory is the position that rational human will is autonomous. We can think of a person as free only when he is bound only by his own will and not by the will of another. When applied to an individual, autonomy ensures that the source of the authority of the principle, which binds him, is in his own will. The Moral law is just such a principle. Hence, the ‘moral legitimacy’ of the *Categorical Imperative* is grounded in its being an expression of each person’s own rational will.

According to Kant, actions are to be done for the sake of duty and without any inclination, not even with the expectation of being perceived as a good human being. However, Kant’s exclusion of inclination does not reduce his philosophy to objectivism. It merely makes the moral decision of the individual autonomous. Hence, it shows the importance of subjective conscience and individual autonomy in moral decision-making.

Kant makes a distinction between the *law of causality* and the *law of freedom*. The two spheres of pure and practical reason refer to the spheres of science on the one hand (in which causal laws have their supreme force) and morality on the other (where freedom and choice are fundamental). For Kant, freedom and choice are not violations of universal law; rather they are expressions of the same. The moral law is based on a conscious and rational choice of the individual. Freedom is not caprice. It is not doing whatever one likes. It consists in rational and deliberate conformity to the Moral Law, which is not external but comes from within.
When man legislates for himself, he also legislates for all mankind. Only those actions are justified which can be universalized. The Moral law is both individual and universal. It is individual or subjective in the sense that it does not have any external source but this subjective-ness is turned into a law, which demands universal validity. For Kant, a free will and a will subject to moral laws are one and the same. The voice of free will is the voice of reason. The Moral Law is absolutely and objectively binding upon everyone because it is the law of reason.

According to Kant, the laws of freedom are autonomous because they are self-imposed. The causal laws are imposed by something else and hence are heteronomous. Thus, in Kant, reason which demands universal obedience is at the same time compatible with freedom. Kant asserts the freedom or autonomy of the individual will, but this autonomy follows from the universal rational nature shared by all. Though the human person is an end-in-himself in Kant, he is also a member of the Kingdom of ends.

For Kant, the Ideas of Reason viz. God, soul and world are not constitutive but regulative. They are not the object of knowledge but of faith and regarded as postulates of practical reason. Practical reason does not yield knowledge but is higher than pure reason, because, moral imperatives arise from the free and ‘noumenal’ self of man.

Kant’s notion of the Categorical Imperative and his assertion of the identity of the individual as a person and Kierkegaard’s insistence on ‘subjectivity as truth’ put forth compelling reasons to draw a corollary between Kierkegaard and Kant. There is a clear resemblance of existentialism with Kant’s Categorical Imperative in its formula of treating others as ends rather than as means only. As free and rational persons, we can only desire relation with the other free and rational persons. If Kant’s Copernican revolution brings about the emergence of modern subjectivity, Kierkegaard understands subjectivity qua an existing individual, as he undertakes the task of the subjective thinker in his endless quest of “understanding himself in his existence”. For
Kierkegaard, human existence is to be taken in its subjective finitude. His approach to the problem of existence begins with the Kantian assumption that human finitude cannot ask reason (theoretical or pure) to account for a realm that is not causally conditioned in time and space.

Kierkegaard's anti-rationalist subjectivism and Kant's critique of theoretical reason in the moral realm put them together and make them essential dialogue partners in our search for a more matured approach to morality. It is also because both of them are critical of the medieval dogmas and conventional morality. For them, genuine religious consciousness presupposes a richly articulated ethical life and arises only in response to the need of the ethical agent. According to Kant, subjectively regarded, religion is the recognition of all our duties as divine commands. Moral life and true religious life are inseparable. He combines a rational morality with the concept of God. Belief in creeds, rituals and participation in ecclesiastical bodies are all worthless religious delusions. Religion consists exclusively of faith in the human capacity for moral improvement. For Kierkegaard, morality culminates in religion. He presupposes the standpoint of the autonomous ethical subject and faith as the vehicle for the development of man.

Even though there are similarities between Kierkegaard and Kant, there are differences too. First and foremost, they differ in their basic style of philosophizing. Kierkegaard's anti-idealist existentialism differs in many respects from Kant's rational transcendental idealism. Kantian morality is based on the radical autonomy of the rational agent and the transition from morality to faith is mediated by the demand for rational coherence. However, in Kierkegaard, the finite subject leaps beyond the limits of ethical striving to a paradoxical relationship with the divine. According to him, in its highest expressions, the religious constitutes a sphere utterly independent of the demands of ethical universality.

Despite the above divergence, Kierkegaard belongs to the rebellion of the son against the Kantian father to whom he is deeply indebted. One
may revolt against the father, but one owes one's existence to him. Besides, even though Kant is perceived for the last two centuries as the strongest theorizer of morality, we can trace in Kantian ethics the very possibility of an open and practical approach to moral philosophizing. This element of Kantianism blossoms fully in Kierkegaardian individualism. The starting point is the individual and not collectivity for both Kierkegaard and Kant. Kierkegaard argues that the collectivity can be guided by mass-behavior, and may lead to dangerous consequences. But if the individual is morally transformed, he would contribute to the formation of a better society.

The present work endeavors to show that the moral crisis of our age is deeply related to the crisis of moral theory. At the root of the crisis is the very treatment that the moral questions get in our day-to-day life and academic discourses. The attack and defense principle of theory relegates morality to a battleground for conflicting theories. As a result, theory betrays the claims for space by the marginalized groups, the women, the black, children and all those beings that are considered as 'the other' and therefore, remain unrepresented in the battle. The failure of moral theory gives rise to the requirement of more accommodative approach to the understanding of morality. The moral discourse should lay emphasis on the cultivation of moral perception, the importance of different narratives of life like stories, folklores, poetry, art etc in improving the "moral ecology" of the human universe. It is against theoretical abstraction and wants to bring theories to the ground.

The issues like the politicization of human rights discourse, blackmailing by group identities, geopolitical hypocrisies, nuclear deterrence doctrine to support proliferation of weapons etc cannot be resolved with the help of monolithic moral theories. At the same time, a search for a master value is also not feasible. Therefore, there is a need to overhaul the theoretical understanding of morality. With this goal in view, it is necessary not to conform to various claims and agendas of a theorist approach to moral problems.
The above approach is akin to Kierkegaardian subjectivity, which drastically cuts short the absolute power of reason and underrates the claims and fixed agendas of theoretical understanding of morality. But at the same time, it is to be remembered that any attempt to particularize human existence, localizes and contextualizes the discourse and would drag morality to the realm of arbitrariness. Human beings need to adjust to the societal norms to a certain degree. One should conform to some degree in order to survive and to avoid unnecessary and unproductive conflicts. That is, an authentic person conforms to some degree and dissent to some degree. He will dissent where significant matters are at stake. That means the individual exercises his own reflective judgment with an open mind. The individual is not an adamant non-conformist. His non-conformity should not lead to arbitrariness. To say that moral agent is authentic is to say that he is free and at the same time not whimsical. His conscience is neither pervaded by the doctrinal hypothesis, nor closed in arbitrariness, but is open to further criticism and so further improvement. Thus, moral discourse becomes open-ended and does not rely completely on fixed principles and rules.

Such an open-ended and comprehensive understanding of morality accommodates and hails the significant roles of emotions, imaginations, diversity, fragmentation and plurality over logical rationality and speculative theories. This model of moral philosophizing provides a rock-solid foundation to the growing discipline of applied ethics. Applied ethics does not shed its good old ties with theoretical ethics but provides a critique to theoretical doctrines, either by refuting them in a particular situation or by giving due considerations to them for their comparative value. The claim of this model is very modest. Its business is not to present absolute reality. Its primary task is to expose the false claims of a theory or a text. If we look at the theoretical model of morality, we find that there is a dangerous design in the preaching of absolute objectivity, which tends to establish and justify totalitarianism. But moral discourse
needs to respect and promote diversity of all kinds. It is the denial of universalism as the ultimate justification of moral judgment.

In this discourse model, the moral agent is a Popperian Scientist, who leaves his conjecture to be tested in the context rather than going an extra mile to forcefully defend it. But unlike the Popperian Scientist, the agent goes even to the extent of throwing the once successful doctrine and adopts another one in some other context. As we live in a seething vessel of possibilities, constantly threatened by complexities, we need to possess a kind of moral savoir-faire and live up to elicit what is real to us. This is possible only when the horizon remains unlimited, we are aware of the possibilities and our judgments are open-ended. When our judgments are open-ended, the moral decision is not confined to the rigid framework of theorist ethics. At the same time, it does not ignore the importance of the subjective conscience and a flash of intuition. As morality is a product of century's long culture, civilization and value-system; confining it to the mere theoretical account would not only be too simplistic, but preposterous. Therefore, a philosophical discourse on morality becomes more relevant in the troubled climate of our times.

The present age requires an integrated enterprise involving critical and sustained reflection on issues of grave importance to modern man. For, by daring to think independently for oneself, one can break with the domain of dogmas and beliefs. Kierkegaard creates the actual situation for philosophizing in this epoch by liberating truth from its impotent and fruitless restrictions to the so-called theoretical reason. His Existential Ethics is a kind of moral discourse that aims to develop us as persons and frees us from incapacitating compulsions of a system or theory. Kierkegaard says,

...If the introduction still awaits another work before a judgment can be made on the subject matter, if the philosophical system still lacks
a paragraph, if the speaker still has a final argument, the decision is postponed.7

The discourse model of morality paves the way to this new judgment by offering a corrective to our false commitments and complacent attitude towards settled dispositions and by liberating truth from closed definitions. For Kierkegaard, we are living on the very edge of decisions, reconstituting ourselves ever anew in terms of actions taken in the light of new and complex situations. From this perspective, for the comprehensive understanding of moral life, what is good is to be understood in relation to personal love, freedom and commitment, and inter-personal relationships. The chapter to follow is an exposition of Kierkegaard’s existential ethics in these very lines.

---