

## **Ethics and Knowledge: A Study from Russell's Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

This paper on ethical studies has been of significant interests because of its extreme acceptability due to its wide application in practical fields of human encounters, in living and society. The prime concern here is a focus on Russell's departure from considering ethics as a branch of knowledge and philosophy, and how this challenging exposition expresses his distaste in this regard. I also undertake an effort to strikingly interpret Russell's points, considering the cases of human passions, and subjectivity in ethics. These arguments are designed and framed to further prove his case to hold ethics as relatively non-fact stating and irrational, yet still admitting the existence of ethical concepts. Russell's twisting arguments, along with strong moral philosophical backdrops on moral philosophy gets deeply reflected in the lines and corner of this paper.

**Key Words:** Ethics, Passions, Subjectivity, Universality, Knowledge.

In the discourse of epistemological studies, the study of ethics has gained significant importance. Ethics emerged as a branch of knowledge when people began to be sensitive about the moral/ethical world in which they live in, where they form cluster of ideas and shape human living according to what one ought to do and ought not to, what is acceptable and what unacceptable, what is admirable and what is despicable. Ethics as a branch of knowledge focuses on human actions and how it shapes human emotions, as it is mostly to do with human passions, with what human desires and it overall shapes our identities. But it is a great misconception to think that ethics is relative in nature. Relativism in ethics advocates the idea that these rules are made by different people at different times. For a relativist, truth is not one. Rather, truth is multi-fold, and varies according to the different understandings of different persons. But knowledge in the strictest sense of being a 'pursuit of wisdom' demands that knowledge is something which is not subject to fluctuations of views and opinions. It is not fixed or static but rather universalistic in approach. One of the chief conceptions about ethics is that it is an independent discipline concerning the lively problems of human society and all of ethical decisions arise from the human mind which is inherently shaped by the societal and the cultural

framework. Hence, since the last century ethical studies has been of significant interests and even in the contemporary era, it has gained extreme acceptability because of its wide application in the practical fields of human encounters, in living and society. But what most philosophers agree with Russell's claim when he says in his last years that 'I do not myself think very well of what I have said on ethics.' But one of Russell's challenging expositions on ethics has been stated in his work *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*. Though Russell has made his philosophical achievements in many of the disciplines of moral philosophy, in areas where his insights on emotivism has profoundly helped the later reformists of emotivism, such as A.J Ayer and C.L Stevenson, yet what I would focus here is his distaste towards considering ethics as a branch of knowledge, and how strikingly he arguments to prove his case.

## I

The engagement of moral philosophers with ethical concepts is nothing new. What has been the stage for discussion among the logical positivists is related to the validity of ethical studies. And not surprisingly, it has been most prominently held by many philosophers that ethical statements are unverifiable and non-empirical. Logical positivists such as Ayer is of the opinion that 'the fundamental ethical concepts are unanalysable, in as much as there is no criterion by which one can test the judgments in which they occur.' This resorts to a clear verifiability principle, where the ethical terms, since they are devoid of any factual content, are meaningless. Even Stevenson, who gave an imperative turn to the ethical terms, does not attack the existence of these concepts by calling it 'pseudo concepts', rather they are for him, non-empirical. But, till then nobody dared to discard ethics from being included as a part of philosophy, as Bertrand Russell did. In his words,

Ethics is traditionally a department of philosophy, and that is my reason for discussing it. I hardly think myself that it ought to be included in the domain of philosophy, but to prove this would take as long as to discuss the subject itself, and would be less interesting.<sup>1</sup>

His valiant attack towards ethics came when he disregarded ethics to be included as a branch of knowledge, and that has been most impressive which called for writing this paper. Russell made his astounding remark in his *Autobiography* when he states that 'ethics is not a branch of knowledge.' In support of this claim, I arrange Russell's grounds in the form of an argument,

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<sup>1</sup> Russell remarks during his discussion on ethics in *An Outline*, p. 180. But, Russell explicates its reasons more comprehensibly in his later work, *Religion and Science*.

where the conclusion is that since ethics cannot be regarded as a branch of knowledge, it is irrational. I shall proceed with by discussing two premises.

The first is that ethics mainly reflects human passions, and hence fails to provide any rational justification of statements.

And the second is that ethical values are mostly subjective in nature.

I shall now discuss Russell's way of interpretation of these premises and its consequences in a broader aspect.

## II

The core rationale behind holding this kind of distaste towards ethical knowledge is that for Russell, ethics is the *resultant of human passions*. And in our discourse of life, it would not be just to derive what ought to be done from mere passions. That is, influenced by David Hume, Russell held that an 'ought' can never be derived from an 'is'. Hume emphatically states that an 'ought' can never be factual, but are expressions of sentiments. It leads Hume to state that 'Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions.' Hume in his *Treatise on Human Nature* makes this claim by questioning the role of practical reason in all our moral motivations. Hume says that it was a mistake for the philosophers prior to him (and even after him) to accept that in order to act morally, one needs to have a rational grasp of moral truths. Hume accepts reason only in as much it instrumentally helps in finding out the right means in achieving our goal. Reason plays no part in determining our goal. As Hume says that it is our passions that help exclusively in positing our goals. Hume's focus on the necessity of human passions can be best represented when he writes,

If morality had naturally no influence on human passions and actions, it were in vain to take such pains to inculcate it; and nothing would be more fruitless than that multitude of rules and precepts, with which all moralists abound. Philosophy is commonly divided into speculative and practical; and as morality is always comprehended under the latter division, it is supposed to influence our passions and actions, and to go beyond the calm and indolent judgments of the understanding.<sup>2</sup>

This leads Hume to further hold that:

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be derived from reason;

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Griffith, Hume: The Essential Philosophical Works, London: Wordsworth Classics, pp. 398-399.

and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.<sup>3</sup>

Passions are nothing but what is, in a synonymic sense, called desires. Being a strict empiricist, Hume says that these desires that arise in our mind cannot be evaluated and be regarded either as true or false, or as reasonable or as unreasonable. Often, there cannot be provided any strict reasons for aiming at a particular desire, because it is a mental act. In this connection, the doctrine of Compossibility<sup>4</sup> is a best explainable method. Russell talks of desires which can be satisfied together, but are not conflicting. He calls these ‘compossible desires’. A happy person is one who guides his life by a set of compossible desires, and which are not conflicting in nature. It is hence seen that any prudent social system will accept the set of compossible desires, by rejecting the conflicting opinions. Therefore, a laymen conception stands that this is a truly desirable position which demands happiness more than unhappiness. But there are also contrary situations, as Russell talks of. To exemplify, it may so happen that X favors a party, but he dislikes the presidential candidate to be elected by that party. In such a case, his liking for a particular party and at the same time, his disliking for the same party is not compossible. There may be cases, where a man endeavors to form a group of compossible members. And he may in the process become happy to involve more members for maximizing the strength of the group. And the opposite may simultaneously happen. Somebody with some adverse motive may strengthen their group to counter the former group. It becomes a dilemmatic situation where the rationale of ethical decisions cannot be discovered. Russell therefore discards the doctrine of Compossibility.

Hume says that reason is the slave of passions in the sense that reason alone cannot lead to moral motivation; rather reason is dependent altogether on preexisting desires that furnishes our motivational force. Hume says that reason cannot enter into the ethical judgments we make, because all our ethical judgments are based on our passions. For instance, in an act of brutality, what causes in us is a feeling of injustice and that feeling (or to call it passion) will be the reason why we pass an adverse judgment on the act of brutality. Hume says, ‘Reason is, and ought, only to be the slave of the passions.’<sup>5</sup> Russell agrees to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 399.

<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of Compossibility was initially put forward by Leibnitz. According to Leibnitz, a possible world is composed of individuals that are compossible, meaning that individuals can exist together based on some commonly compossible goals. But it may also happen that there is another group of composites who may contradict with the existing opinion.

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Russell, 1971, *The Autobiography*, Vol. III (1944-1967), London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., p. 33.

this Humean maxim. Russell says that the practicability with regards to passions (desires) comes in reference to its success. Ethics lay its foundation on passions. Passions brings happiness in a person's life only when it brings success, otherwise, it leads to misery. He says that it has been a general rule of our society that a person who is himself unhappy, but is distributing happiness to others is much better a person than somebody who is himself happy, but is causing unhappiness to others. Russell claims that in such a truly ethical dilemma, it becomes extremely difficult to adopt a single ethical position as a truly ethical one. This is a utilitarian perspective adopted even in society where people generally tend to go by the maxim of 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' i.e., where rationality or any moral decision is made preferring the majority over and above what is desired by the minority. Russell says such utilitarian perspectives are adopted mostly in politics and war. In both the areas, the winner is determined by what the majority prefers and decides. The voice of the minority is subdued<sup>6</sup>. He observes that ethical decisions also goes by this way and hence, ethics is justifiably reducible to politics and war. In his words,

The conclusion that I reach is that ethics is never an independent constituent, but is reducible to politics in the last analysis.<sup>7</sup>

He further writes:

It may be that there is some similar way of arriving at objectivity in ethics; if so, since it must involve appeal to the majority, it will take us from personal ethics into the sphere of politics, which is, in fact, very difficult to separate from ethics.

Consequently, Russell's claim provides a series of arguments to show that ethics, as a traditionally labeled discipline is never independent, but is reducible to politics at the end. He shows that passions are characteristically a feature of lower animals, and hence to live without passions in a closely bonded community is impossible for any social individual being. And to live with passions, one must learn the art of politics; the otherwise of which might lead to a desolate life. But sufficient illustration has also been drawn to show that politics also leads to the irrationality of ethical studies. I also take the help of an example that Russell refers to in his writing. He asks us to take the case of a war where each of both the parties involved (in a war) boasts about their contributions to mankind and states that their defeat in the war might cause a great loss to humanity. It is, henceforth, difficult to determine which party lay

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<sup>6</sup> Russell was a utilitarian in his adolescent times. Later, his views turned mature as he began to adopt cognitivism, and later shifted to adopt non cognitivist stance.

<sup>7</sup> Bertrand Russell, 1971, *The Autobiography*, p. 32.

down the so called ‘correct ethical principles’, since each party claims to do so. Ordinarily, a person might hold that any principle admiring cruelty, hatred, anger and aversion must be averted. It becomes very difficult to determine what is good even in the case of ordinary dichotomies faced in life. Sometimes, it might seem to everybody that the war might have resulted because of some falsity or misinterpretation from the side of one party till the moment it comes to light that there was the same falsehood on the side of the other party. Hence it becomes extremely difficult to put down any rational conclusion altogether. He refers our attention to the world ongoing debate going on since centuries, especially among the Protestants and the Catholics. One falls into the perplexities of judgment in drawing a cogent ethical proclamation.

Therefore, Russell possesses reservations in saying that there is something called ethical knowledge. Nevertheless, it is important to mention here that Russell does not withdraw the existence of ethical concepts in the world, what he disagrees with is the idea of ethical knowledge. Russell maintains that any discipline that omits ethics is always inadequate and partial and hence he admits of ethical concepts, but denies of any kind of ethical knowledge.

### III

The next premise that Russell puts forward to show that ethical studies are irrational is connected to his adoption of the doctrine of ‘subjectivity of values’. Accordingly, the claim made for this doctrine is that there may be differences in tastes in matters regarding the goodness or badness of a particular object. Russell says that we can’t look for objectivity in values regarding such matters. There can be no such thing as absolute sin. That what is ‘sin’ for X, might be ‘virtuous’ for Y. Though they may dislike each other because of personal differences, yet they cannot convict each other, since it relates to differences of tastes. One cannot punish the criminal on the reason that his act is wicked (as it might not be for another person), but punishment is justified on the ground that his activity is discouraged from other’s point of view. A person X can have an ethical opinion in the sense that he/she believes in a certain ethical axiom. But until and unless this axiom is accepted by others in society, that ethical stance cannot be regarded as objective. And unless any objectivity is achieved in ethics, we can in no way consider it to be rational.

Russell point out the aim of ethics is not to give a relative aspect to all of our desires. Ethics attempts to give a universal aspect to human desires. One may ask that how is it possible. Because our experience shows that in our everyday life, we are led by mainly personal desires where we view truth merely as a private possession. For instance, a man who makes his luck by

playing lottery knows some secret which makes him win every time; he does not wish that idea to be known to others. Truth for him (as regards winning his luck) is his personal possession (particular); he is least bothered about the general human good which a philosopher seeks. This is a subjective stand. And, there are two ways by which a person might hold to his subjective stance (or particular stance) and give it a universal paradigm. *First*, it can be done by implementing certain codes (which contains the elements of that person's suppressed beliefs about society, culture and so on) and making it binding on the other people. This happens mostly in the case of a ruler or a legislator, who makes laws by implementing certain rules and conducts on people which contain his suppressed desires. And secondly, many give universal importance to their desires by rousing in others the same desires as he/she feels or imagines. For instance, a preacher always tries to arouse the feelings of religiosity, love and devotion towards God in the minds of others.

Hence, here we see the presence of both particularity and universality. Russell draws another picture, with the aid of an ethical statement, to show the interlocking of both particularity and universality. Russell specifically points out this when he utters the statement 'X is good in itself'. It would be a mistake to say that this statement is similar to other assertive statements such as 'this is a triangle', 'it is raining' and so on. Rather, the statement expresses my wish that it would have been good if everybody desired this (because X is good in itself). It involves a matter of choice of whether it ought to be desired by anybody or not. The statement 'X is good in itself' expresses two senses. In the first sense, it expresses the assertion of the wish stated and in the second sense, it states noting, but merely desires something. The wish expressed may be personal, but the desire expressed is universal. It clearly show an unavoidable paradox in the domain of value ethics, where both the mechanisms of subjectivity and universality work together in the case of a man's desires. But Russell avoids this by showing that here the particularity and universality intermingles together which causes a great confusion in the domain of ethics. The first sentence of our example merely asserts something, but the latter involves a desire. These desires concern mankind/humanity at large. Russell says that even science can at most discuss the causes of the desires, but it cannot discuss ethical statements. It is because ethical statements cannot be designated as true or false, but scientific statements can be. It is therefore Russell sidelines ethics from the domain of knowledge (where truth value is determinable) primarily because ethics mainly deals with the questions of 'values' whose truth values remain undeterminable. Russell has been mainly non-cognitivist in most of his lifetime, unlike during his initial years when he was extremely influenced by G. E Moore. It was then he commented that when we held an opinion that 'X has value', then it is we who ascribe our value (an emotional state) to the entity X. If our emotions (of

ascribing value) were different, then our ascription would be otherwise. But he changed his view and turned himself to a non-cognitivist, especially under Hume's influence, the reason which I have explicated in Section II.

Therefore, two things becomes clearer from Russell's non-cognitivist (to which he later turned into) ethical exposition, that ethics are actually, non-fact stating sentences, and that it is concerned mainly with human desires.

Hence, Russell makes his point clear by separating ethics from the discourse of knowledge paradigm. We have to note the point emphatically that Russell was never against the existence of ethical concepts, rather he disapproved of ethics being included as a part of knowledge system since it cannot be a rational affair. Quite relatively, he lifts up ethical concepts and gives it a social significance.

A contrary example can be taken not from virtues, but from the sense of vice, in order to show that wishes and desire does not always clash with each other in terms of determining particularity and universality. Even when a murderer kills somebody, he has two states going on in his mind that do not directly clash with each other. He has in his mind the assertion of the fact that the act (of killing somebody) that he has performed is not a good one, but an extremely bad act. At the same time, he has in mind a desire that his act might be excused from being punished (and being universalized) and thereby granted mercy to him. Hence ethics has its own roots. There cannot be any directing way or absolute guidelines for leading an ethical life. What is universally applicable for one group in a particular time, may not be so for others and in a different time. Similarly, what is even true as per a subject's beliefs and desires, may also change with the change of that person's belief and desire over time. Universalization in no way means absolute universalization and there always remains scope for flexibility and variability along with the change of belief, desire and time frame, and hence is accommodative in nature.

However, in figuring out as to how we can speak in favor of ethical concepts, it is essential to know as how does society shape an ethical concept. Let me take a moral concept such as 'valuable'. We attribute value to anything or an object or a person at the most. This act of ascribing value to a person or to any object is a mental activity undertaken by an agent. And the mental activity is undoubtedly the result of that individuals' way of perceiving the object, which is largely determined by the socio-linguistic environment into which he/she is in. The environment shapes a child's upbringing largely and has greatest influence over how it takes things and objects to be. As a result, their likes and dislikes are also based on the cultural set up in which they have adapted themselves. Therefore, ethical concepts exist definitely, but their proper



addressal is done by an individual agent, a moral agent.<sup>8</sup> Hence ethics studies can no way be regarded as knowledge in the sense of scientific knowledge where ultimacy, objectivity and stagnancy become final.

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that there has been a wave of thought regarding whether ethical concepts are intrinsically significant, or they are agent dependent. I would avoid getting into those discussions, keeping in mind that it would lead astray the main elements involved in the paper.