



A DIALECTIC OF MORALS

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CHAPTER II

PREFERENCE AND PLEASURE:
INDUCTION OF A PRINCIPLE

PART 1 OF 2

LET US BEGIN with an indisputable fact. No one can deny the fact of *preference*. If there are people who say they have never preferred one thing to another, never done one thing rather than another, we must inquire, then, whether they have ever experienced desire at all, of any sort. And if they admit having had the experience of desire, they can certainly be made to understand the difference between something which would satisfy that desire and something which would not. Hence, they can at least imagine a

situation in which, given a certain desire, they would *prefer* one thing to another. But it is unlikely that we shall be compelled to persuade anyone about the fact of reference—certainly not about its existence, though, perhaps, about its significance. That, then, can be our starting point.¹¹

11. I should like to observe here that the fact of *preference* plays a role in the dialectic of morals like the role played by the fact of *change* in the dialectic of substance. If anyone persist in denying the existence of change, it will be impossible, I think, to induce that person to see the necessity for there being a multiplicity of individual substances. So, too, if anyone really persist in denying that people exercise preferences, it will be impossible to carry him or her any distance at all into the field of morals.

The fact of preference can be set forth in a simple formula which describes every case: X, who is a human being, prefers A to B, and here A and B can either be objects or courses of action. In fact, whatever A and B stand for, whoever prefers A to B is saying that A is *better than* B. The fact of *preference* is thus seen to be equivalent to the judgment of *better-than*.

But a student may object, of course, that he does not know what “better-than” means; he has admitted the fact of preference, but he has not admitted that there is anything really good and bad, or better and worse. If “better-than” means no more than “preferred-*by-me*,” says the student, then the equivalence of the fact of preference with the judgment of better-than can be conceded; but not otherwise.

At this point let us focus the whole issue on the fact of preference. Let us consider two people, X and Y, both of whom, as a matter of fact, prefer A to B. Let X be a moral skeptic, such as the student is, who claims that in expressing this preference he is expressing nothing more than his private opinion; X, furthermore, denies that there are any principles behind this judgment of preference which might lead any other person, in the same situation, to judge in the same way. And, for the sake of contrast, let Y be a moralist who claims that his reasons for preferring A to B include universally valid principles which set up an order of goods, of things as better and worse, for any person at any time and place.

Now it will be observed that the two people, X and Y, agree upon the fact of preference, though they disagree in the explanation they give in answer to the question, Why do you prefer A to B? We have not yet heard the moral skeptic’s explanation of his prefer-

ence, but we know it must be different from the moralist's. It should be noted, moreover, that it makes no difference whether X and Y both prefer A to B, or whether they make opposite choices here, for in either case the fact of preference remains to be explained, and it is the difference in the explanations which matters. Let there be no doubt on this point, for if the explanation given by the moral skeptic is not radically and irreducibly different from the explanation given by the moralist, there is no issue.

We must, therefore, ask the student to explain preference. He may, of course, answer that there is no explanation, that he never has any grounds whatsoever for preferring one thing to another. If he says this, he must be asked why, then, does he prefer one thing to another. Should he reply that, in fact, he does not really prefer one thing to another—that, when he appears to choose A rather than B, it is only in the way in which one tosses a coin to make a decision, or in the way in which one makes a blindfold choice between the right hand and the left—it will be necessary to remind him that he is now denying what before he admitted. He was not originally asked to agree that he, in fact, *did* one thing rather than another, but that he *preferred* to do this rather than that. In short, he cannot admit the fact of preference and deny that he regards one thing as better than another, even if that means only better-for-him. Hence, he cannot refuse to give us some explanation of his preferences, some account of how or why he regards one thing as somehow better than another.

At this point the student can be helped to a decision by being presented with the following dilemma: *either* what is preferred is something which any rational being would prefer under those circumstances, something which in the nature of the case is better than the rejected alternative, *or* the preference expresses nothing more than this individual's feelings at the moment. The student will recognize at once that if he takes the first horn of the dilemma, he is conceding the existence of moral knowledge, a rational judgment about what is good and bad, which has truth for any person. Since the existence of moral knowledge is to be proved, the student quite properly takes the other horn of the dilemma.

Let us now make the student's position explicit. He is saying that he prefers A to B, because he *likes* A. Furthermore, he wishes to be understood as saying that his liking A is entirely a matter of his present state of feelings about A and B; tomorrow he might like B. And he would not be at all surprised to find that other people liked B when he liked A, or conversely; nor would he attempt to argue

with them about this difference in their tastes, for about liking and disliking there can be no argument.

We have now discovered an interesting point, which the student should recognize. The moral skeptic, when urged to explain the fact of preference, becomes a hedonist. In order to avoid saying that he prefers A because his *reason* tells him it is really better, he says that it is entirely a matter of his *feelings*—feelings of pleasure and displeasure. Nothing new has been introduced into the discussion by the use of the words “pleasure” and “displeasure” for the student will admit that “A pleases me” or “A gives me pleasure” is the verbal equivalent of “I like A.” Hence, with the student’s consent, we can conclude that a moral skeptic is one who explains preference in terms of feelings of pleasure and displeasure—feelings which are entirely subjective, operating for this individual and at this moment in this situation.

If, now, we ask the student *why* he likes A, why it pleases him, he may protest the question. There is no why for liking. The feeling of pleasure is an immediate experience which determines preference, and that is all there is to it. The student may even tell us that we have no right to ask *why*, for the very question implies that there are reasons; whereas he has already told us there are none unless the feeling of pleasure itself be called a “reason” for preference. If we wish to use the word “reason” that way, then pleasure and displeasure, he reiterates, are the only reasons for preference.

But there is still some room for inquiry about these feelings of pleasure and displeasure. We admit that there is no problem if A pleases and B displeases. In this simple case, the principle of preference is clear: pleasure is preferred to displeasure. And no further explanation need be given of this principle, for we can agree with the student that it is a principle of animal conduct: animals embrace what they like, and avoid what they dislike. That can be taken as a scientific fact. And although with some of the lower animals their likes and dislikes are instinctive (and so common to all members of the species), in the case of humankind, instinct is either weak or non-existent, and human likes and dislikes are matters of individual conditioning. Hence, we cannot as a matter of scientific knowledge declare what all people will like or dislike. Therefore, on moral matters there is only opinion.

All cases are not, however, so simple. We must ask the student to consider a situation in which he has often found himself; he likes both A and B. Whereas in the simple case first given, B was positively displeasing, here B is pleasing. Now what is the principle of

preference? The student will answer, as it seems he must, that in this case he prefers A because A is more pleasing—he likes A more than B.

We have thus arrived at a second principle of preference. The first principle was: A is considered better-than-B-for-me whenever A gives me pleasure and B displeasure. The second principle is: A is considered better-than-B-for-me whenever A gives me more, and B less, pleasure. The question now is whether a genuinely new criterion has been introduced. According to the first principle, pleasure was the only criterion of preference. The second principle appears to add a new criterion: quantity of pleasure. To be sure we understand this new criterion, let us consider another case in which the alternatives are A and C, on the one hand, and B, on the other. Let it be supposed that B is more pleasing than either A or C taken separately, but that together A and C will give more pleasure than B. Applying the standard of quantity, the student tells us that in such a situation he will prefer A and C to B.

Would any other person make the same judgment? we ask. Yes, says the student, faced by a choice between more and less pleasure—whether the greater quantity be simply the greater intensity of one pleasure over another, or the summation of two pleasures which exceeds a single pleasure—any person would prefer more or less. Is this, we ask, a matter of human instinct or of human reason? Why is more of what we like better than less? The student replies that he doesn't know whether it is instinct or reason, but that it makes no difference. Animals not only seek pleasure and avoid displeasure, but they also prefer more pleasure to less. This is simply the fact, and it applies to human beings as well as other animals. It is an ultimate fact, about which no further whys can be asked.

But, we persist, the criterion of quantity as a principle of preference raises further questions which must be faced. In the first place, the student must now admit that pleasure is not the *only* criterion of preference. Quantity is an additional criterion, and a more ultimate criterion, since one pleasure is preferred to another *because* of quantity, not one quantity to another *because* of pleasure. The student objects, saying that more pleasure is better simply because it is more *pleasure*, not because it is *more*.

To argue this question, let us consider a case. One is faced with a choice between a bag containing three apples and a bag containing two. One likes apples. Both bags are obtainable with equal ease. Let us further suppose that one's appetite for apples is equal to eat-

ing three of them in succession. The preference, then, for the bag of three must be based on the difference in quantity, on the fact that more of the same is better than less. Hence whenever there is an alternative between two things which please in the same way, pleasure itself cannot determine preference, but only something which measures the pleasure, namely, quantity. And if quantity measures pleasure, and if it is on such measurement of pleasure that preference is based, then quantity is a more ultimate criterion than pleasure.

But the student counters by asking us to consider an opposite case, in which pleasure appears to measure quantity. In this case, one is faced with a choice between two bags, containing an equal number of objects, let us say, three apples and three bitter pills. Of course there is no problem here, we hasten to admit, because here the choice will be made in terms of pleasure as against displeasure. The student then revises the situation, supposing the bags to contain three apples and three bars of chocolate, both of which give pleasure, and let us even add, he says, that the pleasure they give is of the same sort. The student will soon realize that his case has now betrayed him, for if any preference is to be expressed it will have to be in favor of the greater pleasure to be obtained from the unit of apple as against the unit of chocolate, or conversely. Given an equal sum of such units in the two bags, and given the same rate of diminishing increment of pleasure from successive units, he must, according to his own principles, prefer the bag which contains the object, any unit of which gives him *greater* pleasure.

That pleasure never measures quantity, as quantity measures pleasure, is thus summarily seen in the fact that there is no ground at all for preference between equal quantities of the same pleasure, and in the fact that whenever one quantity is preferred to another it is because the one preferred gives more pleasure, not simply pleasure.

Granted, the student may now be willing to say, but what is the significance of all this? There are two answers: first, that pleasure and displeasure are by themselves, taken without qualification or measurement, insufficient to explain all the facts of preference; second, the criterion of quantity, as irreducible to the criterion of pleasure, and as more ultimate than pleasure because measuring it, may help us to modify the extreme character of the student's moral skepticism. To show him this, we go on to the next point.

If pleasure, as against displeasure, were the only criterion of preference, the student could persist in holding his original position

that every moral judgment (every judgment of A-better-than-B-for-me) was entirely individual, made by him at this moment according to the state of his feelings, and hence subjective, hence an opinion that has no relevance to anyone else faced with the same alternatives. But if instead of A representing a source of pleasure and B a source of displeasure, we let A represent a greater, and B a lesser, pleasure, then is the judgment of preference for A over B subjective in the same way? Yes, says the student, because the fact that I find greater pleasure in A at this moment does not mean that anyone else does, or need to, or even that I will tomorrow. This we must grant, but that the principle itself is not subjective is our real contention.

We are not trying to say that two different individuals, or the same individual at different times, will find greater pleasure in A. We are saying, however, that whenever anyone finds greater pleasure in one thing than in another, that is the thing he will prefer. And this principle of preference is absolutely universal. It holds for all people everywhere and at all times. One might formulate this principle as follows: if anything at all is good, a larger amount of good is better than a smaller. Even people who say that the only good is pleasure are nevertheless compelled to agree that they would be fools if, in pursuing such goods, they ever took less pleasure when more was available.

Here, then, is a moral rule binding all people. Let us state it as a moral rule, in the imperative mood: Always choose the greater good. Agreeing for the moment that pleasure is the only good, this command can be stated declaratively: A person *should* always choose more pleasure in preference to less. And this moral judgment, however stated, and with whatever meaning is assigned to the word "good," appears to be universally true, a matter of knowledge, not opinion. *Hence when A stands merely for "more pleasure" and B stands for "less pleasure," the words "for me" can be omitted from the judgment that A is better than B.*

Not so fast, says the student. Either you did not need the criterion of quantity to make this point, or I do not understand its significance. You could have made the same point, he goes on to explain, in terms of pleasure and displeasure. For if A stands for "source of pleasure" and B for "source of displeasure," then the words "for me" can also be omitted from the statement that A is better than B.

Here, too, there is a universal moral rule, if you wish to call it such: Always choose pleasure rather than displeasure. And if you want to substitute the words "good" and "evil" as verbal equiva-

lents, you can say: Always choose good rather than evil. But such statements are either tautologies, or they do no more than merely report the facts of animal behavior, namely, that all animals seek pleasure and avoid displeasure, or seek more pleasure rather than less. All that you have done, he tells us, is to disguise a scientific fact by putting it into the linguistic form of a command, or a moral injunction, using the word "should." What is the point of saying that people *should* do what they cannot fail to do? Is there any meaning to a moral rule which cannot be violated? In fact, have we the right to call anything a moral rule, a rule of conduct, unless it can somehow be violated? For otherwise the moral rule would not be a basis for judging people as good and bad, right and wrong in their actions, according as they conform to or transgress the rule.

The usual conception of the moralist's position certainly involves not only universal rules, but the possibility of making such judgments about people in terms of them. Furthermore, the whole discussion is off the point, because the real judgment of preference is made by me here and now in this situation, and is determined not by such universal principles as "pleasure is always better than displeasure" or "more pleasure is always better than less pleasure," but by my present, thoroughly individual feelings about objects I like and dislike, or like more and less intensely.

By such objections, the student has brought the issue into clearer focus. He has raised two questions, not one, and these must be separated. The first has to do with the point about the violability of moral rules. In a sense he is right that an inviolable moral rule is not a statement of what *should* be done, but of what in fact is the case about the nature of human conduct. There must be some distinction, he rightly insists, between moral and natural necessity, between a moral statement and one made by the psychologist as a descriptive scientist. The second question concerns the subjectivity of any actual preference; and here again the student is right if the preference is solely determined by how he feels about A and B. Even if the judgment, *that people should always prefer a greater good*, were truly a moral rule, because violable, it would have no significance practically if, as between A and B, preference were entirely determined by how an individual felt about A and B, which he liked more, for example. Let us consider these two points in order.

The student's objections, it will be remembered, arose from his inability to see why we were so insistent about the criterion of quantity. That can now be explained to him, perhaps, in terms of the fact that it makes it easier to formulate a moral rule which shall

be at once both universal and capable of violation. If we had used the criterion of pleasure, as against displeasure, to formulate a rule (e.g., that pleasure *should always* be preferred), it would have been extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible, to show that this rule was not a statement of observable fact, confirmed by all psychological investigations; for even the pathological cases of masochism are generally understood as people taking pleasure, as opposed to displeasure, in sensations of pain. Let us see, therefore, whether the criterion of quantity helps us.

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