Social and Philosophical Understanding - an example

John Paley

Warnock's "The Object of Morality"

As far as possible, I let Warnock speak for himself, interspersing my own comments as and when necessary

I

p.2: *"I want to consider the idea that the subject-matter of Ethics is, so to speak, inherently shifting and unstable because of the phenomena of social and historical change."*

p.3: *"there is certainly something strongly tempting in this, and no doubt something right....one should also give some thought to the question: what changes? What exactly is it of which we must not take too static a view?*
....it is uncontroversially obvious that views change."

p.4: *"However, it is patently absurd, though it is sometimes done, to present this nearly limitless diversity as if it were a bald, brute, irreducible fact, insusceptible of explanation."*

Warnock, then, claims the diversity of moral views to be capable of explanation. How far he is committed to this claim, the better to obviate the "victories of an excessive relativism" (p.3), is a question I shall raise towards the end. What, though, is to count as explanation? Warnock continues:

p.4: *"For it is really quite obvious that these differences of view, with their consequent differences of prevalent modes of behaviour, are at least in large part consequences of other differences - of, for instances, differences in belief about the natural consequences of actions, or, perhaps even more importantly, the supernatural consequences of actions...beliefs, incidentally, which, in many cases are very far from being able to claim the dignity of knowledge."*

It may be right that (i) differences of moral view can be explained as consequences of other differences. It may be true that (ii) moral views and beliefs about nature or the supernatural are related. But holding (i) and (ii) does not commit one to the thesis (iii) that differences of moral view are a consequence of differences of belief. But it is evident from his examples that Warnock does, in fact, adopt (iii):

p.4: *"A propensity to decapitate strangers is not really surprising in one who is convinced, however absurdly, that a regular supply of severed heads is a necessary condition of the survival and prosperity of his tribe; and at a less exotic level, it is clear that at least some differences, about, for instance, sexual mores are the result of divergent beliefs about the consequences, social or psychological, of various sorts of sexual behaviour."*

It may be the case, as Warnock implies, that, if asked to give reasons for his view as to the desirability of decapitating strangers, the tribesman in question would offer certain supernatural beliefs about the consequences of doing otherwise (just as we would offer beliefs about the consequences of abstaining from, say, punishment, mentioning social breakdown, anarchy, etc., etc.). It does not follow, however, that the view is a consequence of the belief (though we, like the tribesman, prefer to think so) - it does not follow that there is a causal connection here. Citing these beliefs may not be adequately explaining the existence of such and such moral views.

This becomes more obvious when we ask whether we have any reason for believing that the appropriate counterfactuals hold: would the moral views in question not have been held if the beliefs had been any different? The answer to this question is far from clear. To take sexual mores as a example: is it really the case that if certain tribes had no beliefs about the deleterious effects, supernatural or otherwise, of incest, the practice would not be proscribed? Or, would we be any the less opposed to incest if we had reason to believe it not genetically unsound? Isn't it lucky we have discovered it is genetically unsound? Meanwhile, belief in the moral reprehensibility of masturbation continues, despite the fact that we have so far been unable to provide a replacement for the view that it causes insanity. Research, however, continues.

An alternative account of the connection between belief and moral view is available: that both can be explained in other sociological or anthropological terms, as the consequence, for example, of other social, economic, political and historical factors. Strictly, this account leaves open the question of the relation between belief and moral view. But it is suggestive. Perhaps, in extreme cases, belief relates to moral view merely as legitimation (Cf.Berger and Luckmann: 'The Social Construction of Reality").

The term 'legitimation' here (in a non-pejorative sense) bears comparison with the term 'rationalisation'. While the latter enables us to distinguish between a reason which actually brings about an action and one which does not, the former enables us to distinguish between a belief which actually brings about a moral view and ones which does not. Warnock's failure, or inability, to distinguish legitimation from explanation tends, as I shall argue later, to vitiate his entire enterprise.

II

A more general view of the explanation of differences in moral views follows immediately:

p.4: *"Then it is also plainly relevant that what, in human character and conduct, is needed for success, and even for survival, varies widely in different social and physical conditions."*

This passage illustrates one of Warnock's fundamental assumptions; it is the basically functionalist assumption that the structures of thought and social form are explicable by their efficacy in promoting and preserving the prosperity, success and survival of a given society. Warnock's use of this assumption turns out to be not unconnected with his conflation of legitimation and explanation.

Having concluded that people who hold very different beliefs would quite naturally arrive, on the very same basis of appraisal, at wholly different practical conclusions, Warnock turns to the differences in concept (as opposed to views). And repeats his functionalist assumption:

p.5: *"one would expect communities to evolve, no doubt imperfectly and often obscurely, such concepts as they need; and this surely, communities differing so widely as they do and have done, is likely to come about in different ways."*

As it has been argued elsewhere, functionalism has no place as an assumption in a work of philosophy. It is a theory of methodology in anthropology and sociology. To say no more, it is a theory whose cogency has been strongly questioned.

III

Considering, then, the thesis that concepts differ, Warnock continues:

p.6: *"Well, so they do, and of course it is as well to be aware of that. But have we said, in saying this, that moral concepts change, and consequently there is no such thing as 'the language of morals'....waiting to be philosophically investigated? Not necessarily.... If we take 'the language of morals' to consist essentially of such very general, non-specific terms - 'good', 'bad', 'right', 'wrong', 'ought' and perhaps a few more - we have something that there is reason to regard as floating stably in the Heracleitian flux, and to be recognised as persisting through all the diversities paraded by Hegel and the historians and anthropologists. Moral philosophy, it might be said, is concerned with the logic or analysis of these words and their synonyms."*

Later, this conception of moral philosophy reappears as one of

the three possible programmes Warnock suggests, programme (b):

p.9: *"One may say: there is something common to all these, admittedly in many ways diverse, phenomena... namely, they are all instances of appraisal, or evaluation, and indeed of practical evaluation...*

So it is possible to consider what might be called 'logic' of that - the general theory, so to speak of practical appraisal, and the nature of and the relations between those very general concepts which must be employed in any instance of it."

This involves two non-sequiturs.

A minimal version of this thesis is forced on the anthropologist who believes with, for example, MacIntyre, that "moral concepts change as social life changes". Simply, there must be some means of identifying the items on the left-hand side of the equation, namely, moral concepts: and this requirement entails the use of certain very general concepts such as the ones Warnock mentions.

It does not follow (i) that these concepts are employed by the members of whichever society happens to be the object of study. They are our concepts, even if they are very general ones, and they are being used for a special purpose of ours. This is particularly obvious with such relatively sophisticated ideas as 'evaluation' and 'appraisal'. The very general concepts by means of which we identify the 'moral concepts' of other societies are not necessarily the concepts we identify. Has Warnock confused the generality of a certain set of concepts with their universal employment?

But even if we could identify universal concepts such as Warnock requires, it would still not follow (ii) that they had a universal 'logic' which, apparently, he assumes they would have. One might, of course, attempt to formulate the 'logic' of those very general concepts, employed by us, with which 'moral concepts' from society to society can be identified (though even whether this can be done and what it would be like to do it are substantial questions), but this would do nothing to establish the kind of logical relations between certain concepts in those societies: it would not even establish that they had specifiable logical relations at all. The problems of establishing either thesis in fieldwork need not be raised here. It is sufficient to mention the impossibility of establishing them in the way Warnock suggests in programme (b).

IV

Meanwhile, in programme (a), he suggests that

p.9: *"one thing that one could reasonably do would be to survey this very great diversity, in the spirit of the historian or anthropologist, and perhaps try to understand it - see how far, to take just one possibility, differing appraisals of character and conduct may derive from differing circumstances and demands of social life. One might even, perhaps running some risk of parochialism here, consider differing views and sets of views in a critical spirit, as being for instance, each in its own conditions or 'background' more or less reasonable, or intelligent, or beneficient in effect....one will be able to regard one's undertakings as a sort of critical study of the morphology of moral ideas..."*

The functionalist spirit of this passage should be noticed; also its implications. I have already remarked that there are other theories of sociological and anthropological explanation. As long as one remains a functionalist, the quietist idea of a 'morphology of moral ideas' will be a reasonable characterisation of one's programme. The adoption of other kinds of explanation, however, may disturb this complacency. The application of non-functionalist methodology to one's own society, for example, and the moral universe in which one has been accustomed to move, may have distressing, or perhaps revolutionary, implications. I shall return briefly to this idea after considering programme (c), which Warnock himself actually takes up.

p.7: *"The suggestion here is, then...that 'moral concepts'... are of some comparatively determinate, special sort, and*
p.8: *do not change for that reason, - for the reason, namely, that concepts not of that sort are, not different moral concepts, but not moral concepts at all.... If we have, for instance, an individual whose views about good and bad, right and wrong, turn out to derive from a mixture of religious taboos and of passionate, exclusive devotion to the martial glory of his tribe, it seems to me that we could intelligibly say: This man does not see anything as a moral problem; he has no moral concepts at all...*
p.10: *...what the anthropological evidence, for instance, gives one reason to say (is that) in some societies at some dates, 'morality' perhaps is not found at all, or is present only partially, or in some primitive state, or something like that....And clearly, taking this line, the central issue is going to be that of trying to characterise, and thereafter critically to consider in various respects, what this particular mode of appraisal actually consists in...my object is to seek some clearer understanding of this (particular kind of appraisal)."*

What is the difference between programmes (a) and (c)? Programme (c), of course, concentrates on one moral standpoint, while programme (a) ranges over a diversity of moral views. But what makes for this difference?

The natural way of taking what Warnock actually says is as follows. The difference between (a) and (c) is determined by a difference between two senses of the word 'moral'. In the one sense all societies have moral ideas: correspondingly, 'moral philosophy' is understood as an enterprise which seeks to understand the diversity of those ideas "in the spirit of the anthropologist or historian". In another sense of 'moral', only some societies, including, presumably, our own, evaluate on moral grounds: correspondingly, 'moral philosophy' is a discipline which seeks to understand those particular grounds.

This way of understanding the difference between (a) and (c) does not give notice of any additional differences in methodology.

If we now look at Warnock's (briefest) statement of his proposals, we find:

p.26: *"Now, the general suggestion that (guardedly) I wish to put up for consideration is this: that the 'general object' of morality, appreciation of which may enable us to understand the basis of moral evaluations, is to contribute to the betterment - or non-deterioration - of the human predicament, primarily and essentially by seeking to countervail 'limited sympathies' and their potentially most damaging effect."*

This implies, what seems to be true, that Warnock's views about the 'human predicament' (the heading of Chapter 2) are somewhat pessimistic.

What is important about this passage, is this. Warnock failed earlier to distinguish legitimation from explanation. That he has not here rectified that omission is clear from the use of expressions like "the 'general object of morality"; "to understand the basis of moral evaluation" (cf.p 4: "..there is no reason to suppose that the basis of such views is correspondingly diversified.."). These expressions reflect the remaining ambiguity as between legitimation and explanation.

We do not have to look far for the explanation of this. Warnock is a functionalist, and this fact alone makes it hard, if not impossible, for him to recognise the ambiguity. For it is in the nature of legitimating beliefs to make the views and practices they legitimate seem functional to him whose views and practices they are; and here Warnock is considering views and practices which he shares. (Similarly, it is in the nature of rationalisation to make an action seem intelligible: the agent himself is not always the first to realise it is not an adequate explanation of what he did).

In point of fact, Warnock's account of the particular conception of morality has to be understood as legitimation and not explanation. For it explains nothing. At least, it would be most surprising if Warnock thought he had understood (explained) the particular conception by grounding it in the most general facts about the 'human predicament'. If he is trying to understand how far "differing appraisals of character and conduct may derive from circumstances and demands of social life" and his particular conception is one such mode of appraisal, it is difficult to see how general facts, allegedly true of all societies at all times, can contribute to this understanding. Rather, if the particular conception were, as Warnock suggests, emergent in some communities and not others, one would expect understanding in terms of differentiating, particular facts about those communities in which it was emergent. As it is, the question with which he begins is the very one which remains unanswered.

Warnock's only move here is to sharpen his position by admitting a further, methodological, difference between programmes (a) and (c). Whereas programme (a) is that of understanding, "in the spirit of the historian or anthropologist", a programme of explanation, programme (c) is that of "characterisation" only. That is, it is a programme of legitimation. (To see this, compare Warnock's beliefs about the human predicament with the tribesman's beliefs about the supernatural. The tribesman is no more inclined to place a restriction on the objectivity of his beliefs than Warnock is on his. In both cases, the (alleged) universal validity of the beliefs rests uneasily with the strictly non-universality of the moral views they legitimate.)

But if Warnock does make this move, his position only worsens. For the interest aroused by programme (c) can be proportional only to the extent to which he conflates legitimation and explanation. What interest has mere legitimation, mere characterisation? Warnock himself half sees this. Earlier,

his way of obviating the "victories of an excessive relativism" was to resort to the possibility of explaining diverse views. But if 'explanation' is to be understood as legitimation, he is no better off. The 'relativist' is perfectly prepared to admit differences of legitimation and characterisation co-ordinate with differences in moral view.

Has Warnock any alternative ways of arousing interest in programme (c) and so, possibly, of keeping the 'relativist' at bay?

He might say that a characterisation of the particular conception of morality was interesting because that conception was in some way superior. But, independently of the actual characterisation, he has given absolutely no grounds for believing this to be true, or for thinking (if it were true) there could not be a better one.

He might say that it rested on objective grounds: that is, Warnock's beliefs about the 'human predicament' are true, whereas the tribesman's beliefs about the supernatural (for example) are not. But this would only be of interest if indeed the respective beliefs constituted an adequate explanation of the respective moral views. This Warnock has made no attempt to show.

Finally, he might say that the particular conception was interesting because it was curs. But this is like saying that I should be content with my own rationalisation of an action because the action is,after all, mine. The point is: the effort to understand and explain one's own behaviour, or views, as opposed merely to rationalising or legitimating them, may always be a prelude to (perhaps even a necessary condition of) changing them.

V

The echo in the last sentence is intentional. Warnock's theme is, as he says himself, not a new one, either from the point of view of characterisation or from that of explanation. The explanation, however, need not be functionalist (which tends to legitimation). Marx is one philosopher who took up the theme in a non-functionalist way. Nietzsche is another example. But their approach is not quietist in the way that Warnock's is - and for the very reason that it is a non-functionalist approach. For to explain a particular conception of morality which is a feature of one's own society and to explain it in a non-functionalist way, is to condemn it. To assume its functionalism is to legitimate it. Warnock has therefore, only interpreted his particular conception of morality; the point, however, may be to change it.

Remarks on Revolutionary Perspectives

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To be revolutionary in a capitalist society entails holding at least the following beliefs: (1) that it is both desirable and possible to abolish the wage-system, the circumstance that the majority of people live by the sale of labour-power to others who employ it in a manner alien to the interests of the sellers and their dependents; and (2) that those with a stake in the wage-system, the employers of labour, are so powerful and so well-protected by established institutions that militant methods must be used to abolish the system. These two beliefs comprise what may be called the fundamental revolutionary creed.

Among subscribers to the creed we can identify contrasting attitudes to the wage-system. Two attitudes will be distinguished in the sequel.

For one attitude, the revolution represents a rupture with all earlier human history. For the other, it represents a continuation of that history. I shall argue in favour of the second attitude.

For those who have the first attitude the condition of being a wage-labourer is just the most recent form that slavery, in a broad sense of the word, has taken in history. Other forms have been slavery proper and serfdom. The differences between these conditions are largely juridical and incidental. They do not mean that a proletarian enjoys a status superior to that imposed on members of previous labouring classes. The roles of master and men have been articulated differently, but they have remained the same in essence. The mass of mankind has always been enslaved. The object of the revolution is to abolish slavery forever.

One who embraces the second attitude will respond as follows to the above formulation of the revolutionary position.

The transition from slavery to serfdom, and from serfdom to wage-labour, entailed important accretions of dignity, freedom and welfare for the masses of the people. The series of subordinate class roles constitutes a progress, which to a significant extent has been brought about by the oppositional struggle of the people themselves. To adopt the first attitude is therefore to slur their historic achievements. It is, morever, implausible to suppose that men who have always been complete slaves are now going to be made completely free. The best reasons for thinking that men can escape proletarianhood is that they have already escaped other conditions. To regard earlier escapes as having accomplished no substantial change is to nourish the suspicion that any future revolution will result only in the invention of yet another form of subordination.

Advocates of the second attitude, who conceive the revolution as an extension of victories already gained, face a difficult question. Why is it supposed that men can become completely free, that a society of equals without subordination is possible? Does not history teach that while it is possible to increase further the rights and liberties of ordinary men, it is gratuitous to hope for their total emancipation?

One reply to this challenge is that one need not know that complete liberation is possible in order to be a revolutionary. One need know only that more freedom than now prevails is possible, and that the ruling class is now, as ever, concerned to inhibit and arrest th growth of freedom. These things have always been true, and they have meant that struggle, sometimes involving violence, has been necessary for progress, and there is no reason to believe that they have become false. A revolutionary posture is therefore defensible even if the socialist ideal cannot be fully realised. And if it is realisable, the first step in approaching it is to increase the amount of freedom presently enjoyed. One can therefore pursue a revolutionary policy while being agnostic about the feasibility of socialism.

A different and more ambitious reply to the challenge is to argue that a relationship which has made subordination (in decreasing measure) necessary now enables the elimination of subordination. The relationship is that between human needs and the apparatus of production (technology) employed to satisfy them. When the apparatus is relatively undeveloped, men must spend the major part of their energy and time in labour. Because of the state of the apparatus in history, the types of labour men have had to perform to secure their existence have been so onerous that a class division has been necessary between those who carry out unattractive tasks and those who see to it that they do so. Improvements in the status of the labourers were made possible by developments in the apparatus which reduced the amount of drudgery required by the labour imperative, though the possibilities of improvement had to be actualised through struggle, since they always entailed an assault on the existing privileges of the supervisory class. When productive power becomes so extensive that labour need no longer be the focus of men's lives, subordination in any form becomes unnecessary. The exploitation of man by man recedes as the curse of Adam is lifted. Therefore the view that the anti-capitalist revolution continues rather than begins the emancipatory process, when combined with an explanation of that process in terms of progress in productive power, supports the hope that the revolution will not only continue the process but complete it. But the completion must await the accumulation of massive productive power which liberates men from toil. This is what Karl Marx envisaged when he insisted that abundance was an indispensable requisite of a fully socialist society. For the essence of abundance is not a maximum of goods, but a minimum of unpleasant effort required to produce a sufficiency. The bias of capitalism is to check labour-reduction and promote goods-expansion (hence planned obsolescence, feverish product-innovation, huge investments in advertising, etc) since only the latter option preserves profitability. The ruling class continues to have an interest in resisting the further extension of freedom.

I personally believe in the doctrine expounded in the last paragraph, but I should like to emphasise that the first reply, which is far more modest, suffices to render the revolutionary intellectually respectable. It is important to see that one can be a consistent revolutionary without advancing ambitious claims which are difficult to prove about the possibilities for men in society.