

UNIT 1

MORAL EXPERIENCE

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OBJECTIVES

The major objective of this unit is to introduce the learners to the concept of moral experience in general and guide them to gain an insight into the philosophical analysis of the main components of moral experience, namely moral consciousness, moral judgment, moral dilemmas, moral principles and moral sentiments. Various theories connected with the norm for moral experience are presented so that there is some clarity with regard to moral decisions. So at the end of this unit, the student will be able:

- To understand moral experience in general
- To gain a philosophical insight into the various theories of moral judgment
- To have an idea of moral dilemma, moral principle and moral sentiment
- To understand the meaning of dynamics of moral experience

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a branch of enquiry in Philosophy. It is a treatise which studies human behaviour and determines what is right and wrong behaviour. Another term for ethics is moral philosophy. It attempts to show that there is in human beings a spontaneous and moral awareness and orientation for distinguishing between right or wrong. The capacity for differentiating the mere registration of facts from the meaningfulness of such facts is based on rationality. Ethics does not merely describe the rules of conduct as a positive science but it also aims, as a normative science to show if moral conclusions can serve as objective norms for daily living. The whole of human history may be viewed as a journey in moral experience. Humanity has undertaken this important voyage by a continuous process of moral decisions.

Against this backdrop, 'Moral Experience' includes a wide range of concepts like moral consciousness, moral sense, moral sentiments, moral dilemmas, moral principles and moral judgments. Moral experience investigates all these as human events. Psychological states such as intentions, motives, will, reason, emotions like guilt and shame, moral beliefs and attitudes offer further scope for moral experience. It does not stop with psychology but covers concepts like virtue, character, habit and freedom. Hence moral experience may be studied both as a descriptive and as a normative science.

1.2. STUDY OF MORAL EXPERIENCE

The Study of Moral experience is motivated by scientific curiosity, a search for explanations of all kinds of moral phenomena, more specifically as to what is designated as moral experience. However, the study must include the promotion of human welfare. Moral experience is highly contextual and communal. Therefore cultural and social factors play a very important role in the understanding of moral experience. Another significant aspect of moral experience is the moral system which regulates the member of the community. Moral experience is in constant need of revision and improvement in view of public service in a democracy. Individual development of personality always takes place through the study of one's moral experience. Moral sense derives its character from the public context within the larger socio-political and intellectual context. One could argue for moral experience purely on individual conviction. Rejection of external authority and belief in one's own inner light situates moral sense within human nature itself without any reference to any agency or divine will.

1.3. MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Moral experience begins with moral consciousness or moral sense. In fact moral consciousness and moral experience are used as synonyms by many. But it is good to distinguish between the two. Experience is a generic term in the sense that whatever affects a person can be called an 'experience'. It can be an emotion like love or hatred. It can be active or passive like love for a friend or love of a friend. One can speak of one's progress in studies as 'knowledge experience.' Any experience leaves behind an impression or memory. Such impressions or memories cumulatively add up to one's experience. The totality of such experiences contributes to the formation of a human personality.

However in the experiential process of personality development of an individual, there is always a lack of awareness. It is only when an individual becomes aware of one's latent talents and potentialities of every aspect like mind, heart and will that one could speak of consciousness. As a human experience 'human consciousness' is never total. Even though human consciousness or the self-reflective process of a person is integral to human nature, it is possible to distinguish the contents of the various fields of human consciousness. These fields are normally referred to as 'noetic consciousness', 'aesthetic consciousnesses' and 'moral consciousness' which highlight the formal objects of Truth, Beauty and Goodness.

The formal object of moral consciousness or rectitude deals with what is right and the right thing to do. Rectitude or Goodness is very meaningful word. Careful reflection and calm reasoning is required to understand the implications and importance of the phrase 'moral goodness' or 'moral

rectitude' which constitutes the major component of moral experience. The passage from moral experience to moral consciousness may very well be compared with the entry point of an airport and the myriad runways on the tarmac. It is again like going from the merely implicit background opaque experience to the explicit foreground of enlightened consciousness. So far, it has been dim, vague and unthematic. Henceforth it would be clear, plain and thematic.

1.4. DATA FOR MORAL EXPERIENCE

At this juncture, a remark is necessary as to what is specific or 'subjective' experience of a particular individual and what makes for the general or 'objective' experience of every person. A study of the moral experience of others obtained from public contact with them and a careful study of moral history would throw light on the question of the data of moral experience. The most immediate primary data of moral experience are actions which are good and which are done by everyone and the actions which are bad and which are avoided by everyone. The scholastic tenet that 'the good is to be done and the evil to be avoided' is the principle of common sense. Humans come to the awareness of this distinction through the process of socialization, influence and education.

Some good actions are absolute, some are conditional and some others are optional in practice. Similarly some bad actions are avoided absolutely while others are avoided conditionally. A sense of obligation or constraint is the result of the feeling of 'should' or 'should not'. Moral experience is based on a moral choice or freedom to comply with the sense of obligation or constraint. Moral obligation becomes objective in the sense that an individual finds oneself as 'obligated' even before any moral decision. It comes to express a universal application. The second aspect of moral experience is that what is right must be done because it is right to do it and it is an end in itself and avoid what is wrong and must be avoided. The sense of satisfaction when the right thing is done and the sense of guilt when a wrong thing is done is another important datum of moral experience. The right action gets approval and praise while the wrong action invites condemnation and blame.

1.5. PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

A philosophical understanding of moral experience invites us to explore the meaning of terms such as 'good or bad', 'right or wrong'. There are different approaches to moral experience. Linguistic analysis of moral experience serves as a useful method to understand moral problems. Meta-ethical theories like logical positivism, emotivism and intuitionism do not actually solve ethical problems but contain very precious insights for understanding moral experience, particularly with regard to moral ideal or moral value which cannot be reduced to non-moral value. Moral experience is made up of specific moral actions. Moral actions issue from moral values. And the totality of moral values can be called the moral order.

What is the foundation for moral experience? Do humans build such a foundation? Is it universal? How do the humans come to know such a foundation? The first two questions are explicit and the latter are implicit.

Humans as beings with a conscience are dynamic, always becoming and in the making, transparent, undetermined and indefinable. They become the foundation of moral experience. If

Humans as social beings are the immediate domain of moral experience, then interrelatedness becomes the foundation for moral order and experience. This interrelatedness operates at three levels namely, a relatedness with an absolute being, a relatedness with other humans and a relatedness with the infra-human world. For the moment, the relation with the Absolute as religious value is kept aside. The other two relations play a significant role in moral experience. Expression of moral sentiments towards the infra-human world is analogous in the sense that one's attitudes towards animals and plants are similar to one's attitudes towards fellow human beings. Only the relation with other humans serves as the primary sphere of moral experience. Actions in this domain become morally qualifiable and quantifiable.

The social dimension is a constitutive aspect of the human order. Humans are not merely 'social animals' but are bound by 'social contract' as well. The human interrelatedness serves as the foundation for moral experience, human rights and duties. While the believer considers the foundation of moral order to be God, there are others who take human relatedness and freedom to be the foundation of the moral order.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What do you understand by moral experience?

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2) Why is natural law universally valid?

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1.6. NORM FOR MORAL JUDGMENT

Once the foundation for moral experience is established, the question about the criterion for moral judgment arises. Moral judgments must be based on 'norms, rules, standards or criteria. Ethical history has proposed ethical theories which are founded on ethical principles. A cursory view of these norms would shed some light on moral judgment. These theories may generally be classified as teleological (from the Greek word, 'telos-end') and deontological (from the Greek

word 'deon-that which is binding, duties). Teleological theories propound 'ethical egoism', represented by hedonism of Epicurus and Thomas Hobbes, 'eudemonism' of Aristotle and 'ethical altruism' or Utilitarianism represented by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

TELEOLOGICAL THEORIES

Epicurus (4th century BC) looks at pleasure as the motivating power of moral experience and indeed as the end of human life. Pleasure is not the present transitory sensation. It lasts throughout a life time. Pleasure consists in the absence of pain than in positive gratification. It is preeminently serenity of soul or repose (atarxia). Virtue is necessary condition for serenity. Vices produce pain and are an impediment to the acquisition of the serenity of the soul. The highest virtue is phronesis, the prudential art of calculating and measuring pleasure and pain. Epicurean norm is self-centred and hedonistic. What is conducive to the purpose becomes the norm of moral judgment.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679AD) explains all kinds of experiences, namely physiological, emotional, intellectual and volitional in terms of physical motion. Pleasure sets in motion all these of events while pain impedes them. It is reasonable to aim at pleasure for self-preservation which also implies that humans must endeavour to establish peace among themselves which is the first law of nature. Along with this, humans must be willing to forego their claim to have everything. These laws of nature are dictates of reason which govern moral judgment and moral experience. Thus there is openness to social consciousness and civil law in the social utilitarianism of Hobbes. His norm for moral judgment can be interpreted as self-preservation or civil law. Civil law aims at the common good. His insight is that moral good is based on human interrelatedness. Both these theories are termed as 'ethically hedonistic'.

Aristotle (384 BC) states that every thing aims at perfection as the 'good'. In the attainment of perfection, humans achieve happiness. The highest good consists in the attainment of perfect exercise of properly human activities. These human activities are moral and intellectual virtues. Virtue is the mean or middle between two extremes, (e.g.) courage is the mean between foolhardiness and cowardice. Virtue is a constant disposition of the soul. While moral virtues perfect the will, intellectual virtues perfect the mind. Aristotle lists five intellectual virtues. 1) the art of know-how (tekne-later technology) 2)prudence(phronesis) 3) demonstrative reason(episteme) 4)intuitive reason(nous) and 5) wisdom(sophia). The cardinal moral virtues are: 1) courage, 2) temperance, 3) justice and 4) wisdom. In the philosophical contemplation of wisdom, does consist the supreme goodness and perfect happiness. Hence practice of virtues becomes the norm of moral judgement.

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832AD) a major figure in the history of ethics emphasizes utility, which is that property in any object whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good and happiness to the party whose interest is considered. The British utilitarian movement originated with Bentham since it was he who applied the utilitarian principle to civil legislation and morals for the first time. It is measured by the degree of conduciveness to the greater happiness of the greatest number of humans. He states that humans are moved to action by the attraction of pleasure and the repulsion of pain. By pleasure he not only means sensual pleasure but also aesthetic, intellectual and benevolent satisfaction. His famous 'felicific calculus' enables

humans to decide what concrete action to perform or avoid so as to find the greatest amount of happiness. Any moral action results in happiness based on the following seven factors. 'the intensity of pleasure, its duration, its certainty or uncertainty, its propinquity or remoteness, its fecundity of further pleasurable sensations, its purity from unpleasant sensations, and its extent or number of people affected. The norm of moral judgement is pleasure understood in the light of his 'measure of utility'. Bentham's ideas represent personal utilitarianism.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873AD) is even more explicit than Bentham when he states that 'the general principle to which all rules of practice ought to conform and the test by which they should be tried is that of the conduciveness to the happiness of mankind or rather of all sentient beings'. He defines utility as the 'Greatest Happiness Principle' as the foundation of moral experience. Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness he means pleasure and the absence of pain. According to Mill, what humans desire immediately is not their personal happiness but common happiness. Besides there is not only a quantitative difference between pleasures but also a qualitative one. And it is virtue which is conducive to common happiness. He associates the utility principle with the notion of justice. The norm of moral judgement in the case of Mill would be the 'conscientious feelings of mankind'. Hence Mill may be designated as representative of social utilitarianism.

DEONTOLOGICAL THEORIES

The second set of moral theories is deontological which lays stress on duty or obligation. The norm for moral judgement is based on the 'rightness' of a moral duty. Deontological theories like the Divine Voluntarism of Ockham and Moral Positivism of Durkheim speaks of moral norm as extrinsic to moral experience. But the Cosmism of the Stoics, the Moral Sense of Shaftsbury, the Formal Rationalism of Kant, the Right Reason of Thomas Aquinas and the Human Nature of Suarez locate the moral norm as intrinsic to moral experience.

William of Ockham (1290-1349AD): Divine freedom and omnipotence play an important role in Ockham's thought. Since moral order like the created order is contingent, what is good or bad is in such a way as God commands or forbids it. By an absolute power God has established a definite moral order and it is not likely to be changed. He speaks of 'right reason' and any morally good will, a moral virtue or a virtuous act is always in conformity to it. Indeed for an act to be a virtuous act, not only must it conform to right reason but also it must be performed simply because it is good. It appears that on the one hand he posits the absolute will of God as the foundation, norm and source of moral experience and on the other he proposes 'right reason' at least as the proximate norm of morality. According to Ockham, the ultimate and sufficient reason to follow right reason is God's will.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917AD) For Durkheim, morality is a social phenomenon. Society is not the sum of individuals but it is a kind of ideal. This ideal or 'collective conscience' of the group is the source of religious and moral ideals. So morality has a social function and it consists in the help it gives the individual to adapt themselves to live harmoniously with the mores of the group. The norm for moral judgment would be precisely these mores of one's social group.

Collective thought becomes the norm for the truth or falsehood. This kind of thinking in ethics is called 'Moral Positivism'.

The Stoics (4th cent BC onwards) According to the Stoics, reality consists of two principles, one is active and the other passive which stand one to the other as the soul to the body. Good and evil are two necessary parts, each subserving the perfection of the whole cosmos. All human actions are necessitated by fate. Virtue consists in one's internal conformity to the logos, or the cosmic order. Virtue is the only good for humans desirable in and for itself and vice is its own punishment. Humans are social beings and as citizens of the cosmos they must live according to the Logos.

Lord Shaftesbury (1671-1713AD) As an ardent admirer of Aristotle, Shaftesbury insists on the social nature of humans. Self-love as distinct from selfishness can be consistent with and contribute to love of others or benevolence. Rectitude or virtue is the harmony of one's passions and affections under the control of the reason both with regard to oneself and with regard to others. The emphasis is laid on character rather on actions. Virtue must be sought for its own sake. His theory of 'moral sense' states that every human is capable of perceiving moral values and distinguishing between virtues and vices. Moral concepts are connatural to humans but he admits that moral sense may be darkened by bad customs and education.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804AD) Kant is a landmark in the history of morality. Moral knowledge does not depend exclusively on experience but contains a priori elements like necessity and universality. But Kant attempts to show that these elements originate in practical reason. He understands by practical reason the choices made in accordance with the moral law. He discovers in practical reason the nature of moral obligation. The ultimate basis of moral law cannot be anything else but pure practical reason itself. It is Kantian rationalism. Kant starts with an analysis of the idea of 'good will'. He discovers that a good will is a will which acts for the sake of duty alone. It acts out of reverence for the moral law. It acts because duty is duty. Moral law itself is the source of moral obligation. He further proceeds to formulate the universal form as the principle to serve as the criterion for the moral judgment. Kant calls this universal form of the moral law as the 'categorical imperative'. The possible ground for categorical imperative must be an end which is absolute and not relative. For Kant the supreme good is virtue, which is nothing but making one's will accord perfectly with the moral law. No other philosopher has brought out better than he, the nature of the moral obligation, its independence of empirical experience and its foundation in reason.

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274AD) The most prominent Christian philosopher and theologian of the Middle Ages speaks of God as the ultimate cause of everything. A certain plan and order exists in the mind of God which he calls the 'Eternal Reason' or the Eternal Law. As manifest in creation, he calls it the 'Natural Law' which can be known through human reason. Any act that conforms to the plan of God is good; otherwise it is bad. The ultimate end of man is God personalistically conceived. Human reason is the proximate homogeneous norm of moral experience.

Francis Suarez (1548-1617AD) The eternal law is a free decree of the will of God who lays down an order to be followed. The principles of the natural law are self-evident and therefore

known immediately and intuitively by all normal human beings. For Suarez the moral good consists in the conformity to human nature that is to rational nature as such. Human reason is seen as a capacity to distinguish between acts which are conformed to human nature from those which are not. And hence human reason not only becomes the foundation of moral experience but also its standard.

The teleological theories approach moral experience and moral values as good, namely, the good of the humans. The deontological theories approach moral experience and moral values as a right, namely the obligation of the humans. There is a relation of reciprocity between the good and the right. While the norm of the good is an ideal for the humans, the norm of the right is moral consciousness itself. As human interrelatedness is the immediate ontological foundation of the moral order and love is the existential foundation, the basis of moral activity, the norm for moral judgement has to be located in the golden mean of Confucius, 'do not do to others what you do not want others do to you', the golden rule of the New Testament, 'do to others what you want others do to you' or in the categorical imperative of Kant, 'so act as to treat humanity whether in your own person or in that of any other always and at the same time as an end and never merely as a means' The norm of morality is constitutive of a person's self-actualization as a social being and its practical principle for moral judgment is the principle of universal love. Theory and practice together form what is called moral experience.

1.7. MORAL DILEMMAS

The term 'Moral dilemma' is applied to any difficult moral problem. Dilemmas raise hard moral questions. In the context of relevance of morality, moral philosophers state moral dilemma when one moral reason conflicts with another. Moral reasons normally conflict with religious or aesthetic reasons. But moral dilemmas occur only when there is conflict between two moral reasons. A moral reason is a moral requirement just in case it would be morally wrong not to act on it without an adequate justification or excuse. E.g. X holds a weapon for Y; then X has a moral reason to return it when asked for. But if X feels that Y would commit a heinous crime with the weapon, then X has moral reason not to return the weapon.

1.8. MORAL PRINCIPLES

Normally a person of moral principle is associated with a fixed set of rules that ignores the complexities of the situation and fails to adapt one's behaviour to changing circumstances. The morality of principles is contrasted with the morality of sensibility which lays stress on virtue as sympathy and integrity. But a general sense of moral principle indicates some factor that is generally relevant to what ought to be done. Moral principles can then be regarded as statements picking out those factors of situations that can be appealed to as moral reasons. Correctness of universal moral principles is taken as a condition of the correctness of particular moral judgments. Ultimate moral principles and their correctness is a necessary condition of the correctness of all other moral judgments. Without some ultimate moral principles, moral judgments cannot be justified.

1.9. MORAL SENTIMENTS

Moral sentiments are a subset of affective phenomena like feelings, dispositions and attitudes that are more or less intimately related to moral phenomena. Moral sentiments are varied and result in different responses to moral phenomena. There are cognitivist and non cognitivist theories of emotion which also apply to moral sentiments. Cognitivists (Nussbaum: 2001) identify emotions with evaluative judgments. Noncognitivists (William James: 1842-1910) view emotions as essentially felt experiences different in kind from that of beliefs and judgments. Contemporary noncognitivists (Prinz: 2004) believe that sentiments are not properly amenable to assessment in terms of truth or falsehood. Philosophers have debated the role of moral sentiment in moral deliberations and judgments, moral motivation and moral responsibility. Today moral philosophers are especially concerned with the role of moral sensibility, a capacity for experiencing or disposition to experience feelings, emotions, honour, pride and shame relative to the role of reason.

Philosophical interest in the affective aspects of one's moral experience is not limited to any epoch like the moral developments in the 18th century British moral philosophy. Right from the early Greek thought, one finds a concern with the place of feelings, emotions and affective attitudes generally in the constitution and care of the psyche or soul. . For Plato and Aristotle human excellence requires that one's soul is properly constituted in the relation of the rational, desiderative and appetitive parts- the latter comprising the domain of sentiments and emotions. Proper constitution of the soul is an achievement of the harmony among all the three. All affects of the soul have ethical import even if they do not have ethical content.

1.10. DYNAMICS OF MORAL EXPERIENCE

In the evolutionary vision of the human community, the question of universal validity of moral norm raises questions. The dynamic becoming of the human order relativizes any absolute norm for moral experience. Authors like Charles Darwin (1809-1882AD), Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955AD) Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950AD) with much evidence from biology, science and philosophy emphasize the dynamic and changing consciousness of the human and corresponding moral order. Hence the structure of moral experience must be understood in the sense of what constitutes the constant of moral experience and what makes the variable. While moral consciousness in a univocal sense remains the constant, immediate data in an absolute manner, the same moral consciousness in specific and particular contexts of the moral law becomes the relative norm of moral experience. While metaphysical certitude is possible and is in fact existentially operative with regard to the immediate data of moral experience, moral certitude is sufficient with regard to the specifications of the moral law.

1.11. LET US SUM UP

Humans in search of realization base their moral experience in the ontological foundation of moral obligation which is nothing but human interrelatedness and the norm for moral good is nothing but the social character of the human community. Moral precepts and sentiments as self-evident factors regulate moral experience. By continuously becoming human and moral persons and progressively developing human and moral consciousness, moral experience is particularized and concretized. This process involves both moral intuition and reflection on human and moral experience. Love is the form of all moral precepts and norms.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Name some of the important ethical theories.

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2) Write a short note on moral sentiments.

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1.12. KEY WORDS

Moral consciousness: Moral consciousness or rectitude deals with what is right and the right thing to do.

Moral dilemmas: Moral dilemmas occur only when there is conflict between two moral reasons. A moral reason is a moral requirement just in case it would be morally wrong not to act on it without an adequate justification or excuse.

Moral sentiments: Moral sentiments are a subset of affective phenomena like feelings, dispositions and attitudes that are more or less intimately related to moral phenomena. Moral sentiments are varied and result in different responses to moral phenomena.

Moral Principle: A general sense of moral principle indicates some factor that is generally relevant to what ought to be done.

1.13. FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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1.14. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. Moral experience begins with moral consciousness or moral sense. In fact moral consciousness and moral experience are used as synonyms by many. But it is good to distinguish between the two. Experience is a generic term in the sense that whatever affects a person can be called an 'experience'. It can be an emotion like love or hatred. It can be active or passive like love for a friend or love of a friend. One can speak of one's progress in studies as 'knowledge experience'. Any experience leaves behind an impression or memory. Such impressions or memories cumulatively add up to one's experience. The totality of such experiences contributes to the formation of a human personality.

2. A philosophical understanding of moral experience invites us to explore the meaning of terms such as 'good or bad', 'right or wrong'. There are different approaches to moral experience. Linguistic analysis of moral experience serves as a useful method to understand moral problems. Meta-ethical theories like logical positivism, emotivism and intuitionism do not actually solve ethical problems but contain very precious insights for understanding moral experience, particularly with regard to moral ideal or moral value which cannot be reduced to non-moral value. Moral experience is made up of specific moral actions. Moral actions issue from moral values. And the totality of moral values can be called the moral order.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. These theories may generally be classified as teleological (from the Greek word, 'telos-end') and deontological (from the Greek word 'deon-that which is binding, duties). Teleological theories propound 'ethical egoism', represented by hedonism of Epicurus and Thomas Hobbes, 'eudemonism' of Aristotle and 'ethical altruism' or Utilitarianism represented by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

2. Moral sentiments are a subset of affective phenomena like feelings, dispositions and attitudes that are more or less intimately related to moral phenomena. Moral sentiments are varied and result in different responses to moral phenomena. There are cognitivist and non cognitivist theories of emotion which also apply to moral sentiments. Cognitivists (Nussbaum: 2001) identify emotions with evaluative judgments. Noncognitivists (William James: 1842-1910) view emotions as essentially felt experiences different in kind from that of beliefs and judgments. Contemporary noncognitivists (Prinz: 2004) believe that sentiments are not properly amenable to assessment in terms of truth or falsehood. Philosophers have debated the role of moral sentiment in moral deliberations and judgments, moral motivation and moral responsibility. Today moral philosophers are especially concerned with the role of moral sensibility, a capacity for experiencing or disposition to experience feelings, emotions, honour, pride and shame relative to the role of reason.

