3 Moral Universality and Moral Diversity (i)

3.1 WHY MORAL DIVERSITY CANNOT BE TOTAL

3.1.1 According to the argument of the last chapter, there must be morality wherever there is social life. This is in fact the case. Morality is universal in the sense that in every community there are virtues which the members have an obligation to cultivate and practise, principles upon which they have an obligation to act, and rules which they have an obligation to follow. But, while everywhere there is morality, there is not everywhere the same morality. The virtues, principles and rules are not always and everywhere the same. There exists and always has existed a ‘diversity of morals’. This can be illustrated by the institution of the family and the moral virtues, principles and rules connected with it. It exists in every community but not in the same form. It takes one form in urban North America, another in rural India. In many respects it is markedly different in modern Europe from what it used to be in medieval Europe. At different times and in different places, relations between husbands and wives, between parents and children and between near and distant kinsfolk have been based upon different principles. There are and have been different rules about eligibility for marriage, about whether, and if so for what reasons, it can be terminated, about the scope and limits of parental authority, as well as about many other details of family life.

There is nothing surprising about this. We know that human life is necessarily carried on in communities and that these can take and historically have taken different forms. The terms upon which people live together are not, and need not be, always and everywhere the same. The same therefore holds for moral virtues, principles and rules. They differ from age to age and from place to place, depending upon what form social life takes and upon the ideas and values, the knowledge and understanding, upon which it is based. Historically religion has been an important factor in moral diversity and it is by no means negligible today. Different religions generate different ways of life: for instance, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, to mention only the most familiar cases. Religion is not, however, the only factor in moral diversity. But more about that in the next chapter. First, it is important to appreciate that moral diversity cannot be total. Certain moral principles are necessary if there is to be any social life at all, irrespective of its particular form. We have already encountered two of them; the principles of fellowship and of social responsi-
bility (see 2.3.1–2 above). Again, this is not surprising. We have already seen (in 2.3.1) that every community must possess certain characteristics if it is to be a community properly so-called at all. Moreover, as we shall see, with some qualifications the same moral principles are necessary in any form of human association.

3.1.2 There are nine moral principles which are essential for social life as such, and it is convenient to divide them into two groups. The first contains three, the second six. The three are beneficence, respect for human life, and justice; the six, fellowship, social responsibility, freedom from arbitrary interference, honorable conduct, civility, and child welfare. There are also virtues associated with these principles, but more about that later (see 3.4.3). Of the first group, beneficence and respect for human life are straightforward. But justice needs to be discussed at some length. There can be no doubt about the necessity for beneficence. Without it, an essential prerequisite for trust would be missing. No one can be trusted who does not acknowledge an obligation always to choose good and not evil, and, when faced with a choice of evils, always to choose the lesser. To the extent that the commitment of beneficence is not met, a community is exposed to avoidable and perhaps irreparable harm. Respect for human life, in the limited form of respect for the lives of fellow members, is also clearly necessary. Without it, another essential prerequisite for trust would be missing. The principle does not mean that the life of a member can never be taken. It prohibits wanton killing and requires that no member's life should ever be unnecessarily endangered. It requires that the taking of a member's life must always be justified: for instance, as an officially prescribed punishment, in self-defence, or to vindicate personal honour.

3.1.3 Justice in the elementary form of 'to each his due' is an essential moral principle in any community. It requires that each member should render what, in virtue of his status as a member, is due from him to his fellow members, and should receive what is due to him from them. Without this principle there could be no such status as that of 'member' and hence no community. What in detail is due to and from each member depends upon the character of the community; upon its terms of membership, its values and institutions, and the various roles connected with them. Thus, while the abstract principle of justice is a moral principle of social life as such, its content varies from one community to another. This difference in content, which gives rise to different conceptions of justice, is a reflection of moral diversity. But there is one thing which is always due to and from every member, irrespective of the particular culture and values of a community. This is fair treatment. The idea of fairness is integral to the concept of justice in all its forms. John Rawls saw this and summed it up in his