
UNIT 1 HUMAN VALUES

Contents

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Subjectivism
- 1.3 Subjectivism of Mackie
- 1.4 Cultural Relativism
- 1.5 Rational Constructivism
- 1.6 Emotivism of Ayer
- 1.7 Realism
- 1.8 Intuitionism
- 1.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.10 Key Words
- 1.11 Further Readings and References

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims at introducing the students to the understanding of moral values and to the contemporary debates of objective and anti-objective schools on the metaphysical aspects of ethics. The debate is mainly centered on the question if values are objective or determined by subjective factors like culture and society. While presenting the different views, this unit adopts a critical attitude to these schools and points out the lacunae in their arguments.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The question that we will pose now is to know if there are objective moral values. Those who say ‘yes’ are moral objectivists. Those who say ‘no’ are the anti-objectivists or subjectivists. But what do we understand by “objective” values? In order to understand this, it is useful to make a distinction, concerning values, between the *model of perception* and the *model of the taste*. According to the model of perception defended by the objectivists, something is desired or approved, because it has a value. There are things in the world which have values and it is of this fact that we desire them. According to the model of taste upheld the subjectivists is the good, a thing has a value because it is desired. “It is desire that gives foundation to value”. Indeed, the partisans of these two models agree on the fact that there is a logical equivalence between desires and values: it is commonsense to say that we prefer good to evil, that we do not like that which has a negative but like that which has a positive value. If something is desired, it has a positive value for the one who desires it and if something has a positive value; it is desired by the one who apprehends it. It would then be conceptually inconsistent to say that one desires something that has a negative value. (To the idea that some people can wish evil deliberately, it is always possible to answer that those people attribute a positive value to evil and for them, evil is good). If one admits this equivalence between desire and value, then the task is to know

which of the two is most fundamental. For the partisans of the model of perception, value is more fundamental than desire, while for the partisans of the model taste, desire is more fundamental than value. It is to be noted that desire should not be understood in a very narrow sense of the term, but it should be understood largely so as to include preference, approval, appreciation, emotion, etc. The idea is that we have a *pro-attitude* in relation to something if and only if we attribute a positive value to it.

Let us then try to define objective value: A value is objective if it is more fundamental than the pro-attitudes in relation to it, i.e., if it exists independently of our desires, preferences, emotions etc. *A moral objectivist adopts the model of perception.* In this sense, a moral objectivist is a moral realist. One is objectivist or realist about a thing, if he/she accepts that a thing exists independently of our mind, the way in which we represent it or desire it. (This thesis has to be distinguished from a more extensive thesis called cognitivism which upholds that the evaluative statements have values of truth : This is more extensive, for it includes certain versions of relativism upholding that all evaluative statements are either true or false (Mackie). Objectivism implies cognitivism, but not the other way). (We will thus hold here moral objectivism and moral realism as synonymous). (It is useful to adopt a narrow definition of objectivism: A value is objective not because it is independent of *all* attitudes in relation to it, but *only* of pro-attitudes. Thus, a value that would depend on our beliefs, but not on our desires could be considered as objective in a limited sense of the term.) *On the contrary, the anti-objectivists support a model of the taste:* values do not exist independently of our attitudes of desires, preferences, approvals, etc. Had we no desires, there would be no values. If we consider the distinction between the noun “value” and the verb “to value”, we can say that the objectivists think that the noun comes first (it is because *X* has a value that we value it), whereas the subjectivists think that the verb comes first (it is because we value *X* that it has a value).

Anti-objectivist approach to ethics denies that there are objective values or norms. We tend to think that infanticide is bad placing it on equal parance with “snow is white”. This is precisely what the anti-objectivists reject: not that they hold infanticide as good. For them, infanticide *in itself* is neither good; it is not independent of our pro-attitudes. Anti-objectivism adopts a position which may be called relativism, in a large sense of the term. Relativism is a thesis which holds that values depend on individual or collective attitude towards them. We have already seen that values are often classified into three types: epistemic values (true, false), aesthetic values (beautiful, ugly) and ethical values (good, bad). There are also three corresponding types of relativism. Epistemic relativism holds that the claim of truth value of statements depend on individuals or group. Aesthetic relativism holds that what is beautiful or ugly depends on people or cultures. Moral relativism, which is of interest to us here, supports that what is good or badly depends on individuals or cultural groups.

1.2 SIMPLE SUBJECTIVISM

Simple subjectivism claims that all moral statements are true. Truth is what I approve of. It is a relativist position which means what I hold is true for me and what you hold is true for you. It differs from person to person, so it is called

modal of taste. They accept both the ontological version and semantic version. *Ontological version* means that no objective value can exist independent of the subject – this version is also known as Metaphysical version. For e.g.: when I say smoking is bad, it depends on me (subject). *Semantic version* means that we give meaning to every truth claim. Each statement made by each person is true according to each one. According to them no statement is false because truth is relative. This is called infallibility. Therefore all moral statements are true.

Subjectivism goes against contextual sensibility. For instance let us imagine Ram and Sharma are walking the river side, suddenly a boy fell into the river and was drowning seeing this Sharma asked Ram to jump into the river and save him but Ram does not know swimming so he refused to jump into the river and save the boy. In this case, from the subjectivist position if we look at what Ram did was right, because he thought that if he jumps in he will also lose his life for he does not know swimming. But at the same time he is ignoring the objective value that life is precious.

Subjectivists claim that all moral statements made by all are true, so they respect the difference of opinion among the statements that in turn becomes an objective value. There is a possibility of contradiction in this school of thought, for each one claim that what he holds on to is true according to him. There is *no line of demarcation* in simple subjectivism. But in general what you like may or may not be good. For example: you may like smoking but smoking is bad to health. There are *intrapersonal conflicts* that are ideas change over a period of time, what I hold on to be true at present need not remain true at all times. Preferences are subjected to change and in this change of preference there is a claim of objective value. Subjectivists hold that no objective value can exist independent of the subject, but then there is an objective value exists independent of the subject. If there is no objective value how can one say that the present preference is better than the past. For example: once I thought that Marshall was bad but now I changed my opinion about him and realized that he is a good fellow. *Interpersonal conflicts*: since everyone has his/her own opinion on every matter, there arises conflicts between two or more persons in their view of claims on a specific matter, but which is true we do not know unless there is an objective value, which subjectivists reject to be independent of the subject. These *moral conflicts (intrapersonal and interpersonal) cannot be solved* if we look at the problem from the subjective point of view, because they claim that there are no objective value existing independent of the subject but there are objective values existing independent of the subject. Therefore there is an *impossibility of the moral dissent*.

1.3 SUBJECTIVISM OF MACKIE

Mackie accepts the ontological version that no objective value can exist independent of the subject, but he rejects the semantic version of subjectivism and so all moral statements are false. There is no objectivity existing but every time we make a statement we are pretending or claiming to have objectivity in all our statements when there is no objectivity in all our claims. This argument is called argument from queerness; that is consciousness does not exist, but when we speak about consciousness we speak as though it really exists, there is no way in which we can prove it. When we say that a table exists one can prove it, for one can see it, touch it but we cannot see or touch consciousness.

Every value should lead one to action. Moral judgments are good that give reason for actions. If moral judgments are good that give reason for actions then moral judgments should give categorical (there should not be any conditions like if's and but's) reason. But the problem with this is that there are no categorical reasons. Therefore all moral judgments are necessarily false.

What then is of interest in Mackie's theory compared to simple subjectivism? Firstly, it is closer to common sense than is simple subjectivism: We have observed that there are some reasons to think that common sense tends towards objectivism in terms of values (descriptive form of evaluative statements, common beliefs in a *good* response to moral dilemmas). Simple subjectivism has to attribute to common sense a thesis which is not its own.

Does Mackie's theory of the error address the problems of infallibility and the impossibility of moral conflict? With regard to infallibility, Mackie's idea is that in matters of morality, far from being right, we are always mistaken. But does this change in approach lead us to any gain? We would probably like to accept that while we can be right sometimes, we can be wrong at other times, for if we are always mistaken, we would never have any means of making intra-subjective or inter-subjective evaluations: the judgments of Martin Luther King are as false as those of Caligula. That is not different from simple subjectivism. With regard to the impossibility of moral conflict, Mackie's theory does make an attempt to resolve: in so far as our judgments claim to speak about the external objective things, two judgments made on a same thing can be contradictory. In the case of simple subjectivism, we do not even claim to speak about the same thing, therefore dissension is impossible. But in the case of Mackie's theory of error, we do claim to speak about the same thing, Barack Obama, Bush and myself, when we discuss partial abortion, dissension *is* possible. But it is not that one of us is right, but both are wrong. However, the objection that we cannot account for inter-subjective or intra-subjective comparisons still remains. Such comparisons cannot be founded.

1.4 CULTURAL RELATIVISM

This school of thought on one hand accepts both the ontological and semantic version and says that all moral statements are true. On the other hand they accept the ontological version and reject the semantic version and say that all moral statements are false. Therefore all moral statements may be true or false. This school takes a relativist position in which each group claims what they hold is true according to them.

Since they claim the subjectivist position they also have the same advantages of the subjectivism that is respect for difference in cultural context. Since there are diversities of culture there is respect for difference that brings out the notion of tolerance. But indirectly they are holding on to objectivity. There are diversities of moral norms and practices according to different cultures which are fundamental and derived. If so there are no objective values. Therefore cultural relativism is true. These diversities and differences are out of superficial beliefs but everywhere in all most all the cultures the same objective values exist. The same objective value can be executed in different ways in different cultures. For example, in one of the African countries, Fathers of the families are killed when they are in their 50's or 60's. They believe that if their fathers die early with good

health, and when they are reborn, they will be healthy. So as a sign of more love and respect towards to their fathers, they kill them early that before they become attacked by the diseases of the old age. But for the people of the other cultures, when they look at this kind of above mentioned practice, they will see it as an act of asininity (foolishness). In all the cultures we have great respect for our parents but we show it to them in different ways. Therefore whatever people of all the culture do is right according to them but they act on a particular objective value indirectly. Here the tolerance as an objective value is held by all the cultures. Moreover, each individual is a member of various groups at the same time like cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious and so on. The values that exist in each of these groups can conflict with each other. It is up to each individual's choice to resolve the conflicts.

1.5 RATIONAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

According to this school of thought moral truths do exist in so far as they are constructed. They do not exist if you do not construct it. We can construct moral truths through rational agreement. Something is morally good because we agree through reason. This can be questioned saying who decides something as morally good or what is rational or non- rational? The answer is that there is an ideal observer who does not exist but an imaginative figure. This ideal observer is well informed and impartial.

There is no special faculty except reason that you can make comparative judgments. For example: Adolf Hitler's action is wrong and Martin Luther King's action is right. Whatever is decided is coherent (rational).

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Define Simple subjectivism.

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2) What is meant by Ontological version of subjectivism?

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Ethical Foundations

3) What are the intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts in Simple subjectivism? Can it be resolved? Why?

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4) What does Mackie object against the simple subjectivists? Or State theory of Error.

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5) Clarify the position that cultural relativists hold.

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6) What is the fallacy of argument?

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7) What is 'Rational Constructivism'?

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1.6 EMOTIVISM OF AYER

The argument of Ayer in favor of Emotivism is related to its adherence to logical positivism, an influential philosophical current at the beginning of the century which sought to apply in philosophy the same methods as in science. The logical positivists proposed the principle known as “verifiability criterion of meaning” to test if a claim is cognitively meaningful (in the sense of being true or false): A claim is cognitively meaningful if and only if it is either *analytic* (true because of logical connections and the meaning of the terms) or *empirically verifiable* (some conceivable set of experiences could test whether it was true or false).

An analytic statement is one that is true because of logical connections and the meaning of terms. An example would be “All bachelors are single”. We know that this is true, not by doing an empirical investigation, but by understanding the terms and logical connections. Since “bachelor” means “single man”, the statement means “All single men are single”. Ayer recognizes that analytic statements don’t have to be empirically verifiable in order to make truth claims. For a statement to be empirically verifiable, some possible observations must be able to make it highly probable. Ayer’s famous example was “there are mountains on the other side of the moon”. Even though during the life time of Ayer, this statement could not be tested, it was still was in principle verifiable, since descriptions of possible observations made the statement probable. The positivists thought that “God exists”, for example, fails the test since it is neither analytic nor empirically verifiable. So they thought that “God exists” is neither true nor false; it lacks cognitive meaning and has only emotive meaning. So they called “God” a pseudo-concept. This view was popular once, but it is no longer popular today partly because this view itself is neither analytic nor empirically verifiable, so is meaningless on its own terms.

Ayer’s logical positivism implies that moral judgments are cognitively meaningful if and only if they are either *analytic* or *empirically verifiable*. Ayer was sure that moral judgments are not analytic. Following Moore, he also rejects naturalistic definitions (for example, “good” = “approved by the society”) because they conflict with how we use language (for example, in ordinary speech it is not contradictory to say “some things approved by the society are not good”). Naturalistic definitions fail also because they try to define an emotive term (like “good”) using non-emotive terms (like “approved by the society”). It follows that moral judgments are not cognitively meaningful; they only have emotive meaning. Ethical truths are impossible. Emotivism is a form of non-cognitivism, the view that there are no moral truths.

Ayer reasoned this way: Truth claims (except for analytic ones) must be empirically verifiable. But moral judgments are not empirically verifiable since “good” is not definable in empirical terms. And moral judgments are not analytic (since they are not true by definition). Since moral statements are neither empirical nor analytical, moral statements are neither true nor false. It follows that moral judgments are not truth claims. But then they must be emotive. Ayer thus concludes that moral judgments are neither true nor false, but are merely expressions of feelings. “X is good” means something like “Hurrah for X.”

What is advantageous of emotivism over simple subjectivism is that it avoids affirmation that all moral judgments are true. If a person says “It is a good thing

to kill homosexuals and gypsies”, subjectivist must show that it is a true judgment (since the statement itself only expresses a particular attitude of this person). For Ayer, on the contrary, this statement is not true. But the problem is that it is not false either. Still worse is that we cannot favor the champions of human rights over this person. Comparative moral judgments remain impossible. As in the case of Mackie’s theory of the error, we are left to wonder if there is any progress at all in Ayer’s emotive theory.

Another objection to emotivism consists in calling into question the first premise of its argument: the positivist premise according to which a true or false statement is either empirical or analytical. The problem is that this first premise seems to refute itself: this premise itself, as we have just shown above, is neither analytical nor empirically verifiable. Generally, those who hold that “Any thesis must be verifiable by experience” rally up against the objection that this thesis itself is not verifiable. The majority of the logical positivists reformulated their thesis when they noticed this contradiction.

The third objection is that not all moral statements can be translated into emotive expressions. “Do what is good” does not correspond to “Do what is hurrah.”, nor can “Hurrah for good people.” be rendered as “Hurrah for hurrah people.” We do not see how emotivism can account for the difference between moral statements and moral imperatives. The fourth difficulty is that we do not seem to be speaking of our emotions when we make moral judgments.

In conclusion, we can say that the sophisticated developments of Ayer, while helping us to avoid certain difficulties imbedded in simple subjectivism, run into the same basic problems. The common problem is to account for *comparative* moral judgments, which would presuppose that some moral judgments are more correct than others. If all moral judgments are equally true (simple subjectivism), equally false (theory of the error), neither true nor false (emotivism), claiming that some moral judgments are truer than others will necessarily be false.

1.7 REALISM

Let us recall that there are two models: model of taste and model of perception. According to the former, values are derived from the desire of the subject (individual). Therefore desire comes first and then values proceed from it. This is also known as subjectivism. According to the latter, values exist first and something is desired based on the values. This is also known as objectivism. According to Realism, objective values really exist and they are not creation of individuals as subjectivists claim to be. They exist independent of the subject.

Realism is confronted with different challenges. According to Mackie there is no objective value exist independent of the subject, but the subject is necessary to internalize these values and to produce norms. Here he challenges the objectivists claim that objective value can exist independent of the subject. What is the faculty through which you can see the objective value if it exists independently, how can you know them without the subjects.

David Hume an empiricist talks about two faculties that are desire and reason. Desire is something that ought to be. It is about your desire of what should be an ideal thing. It cannot be judged as true. Reason describes what is of the case.

Reason can be further divided into beliefs and facts. Beliefs can be said true or false with what is the fact. Faculty of reason involves beliefs and facts. Reason is given priority than desire. This faculty of reason represents the world as it is, with the help of reason we can make judgments whether something is true or false. Reason is extrinsically related to action and conforms to the society. Here the self gets adjusted to the world. Faculty of desire involves desire and passions. It represents the world as it should be. It cannot make judgments that can be said true or false. It is intrinsically related to the action and conforms to the individual. Here the world gets adjusted to the self. Here David Hume holds that moral convictions resulting from values are motivating factors that lead us to an action (moral internalism). Moral beliefs are not the motivating factors for action. Moral convictions cannot be beliefs but objectivism claims that convictions belong to beliefs (moral value). Therefore moral objectivism is false.

Logical problem in objectivism is that there is no necessary connection between reason to desire and values to norms. This connection cannot be possible. For instance, from the fact that society is unequal we cannot say that the society must be unequal.

1.8 INTUITIONISM

Intuitionism is like mathematical truth, that only by a matured mind it can be known. The argument from intuition holds that happiness is a fundamental or intrinsic value that cannot be known except through intuition. It cannot be explained in other values.

Intuition is non-natural. Why so? It is because “good” cannot be reduced to natural properties. For example, subjectivists claim that good is what I approve of and the constructivists would claim that good is what is agreed upon rationally and cultural relativists would hold that good is what the group approves of. Here good can be reduced to natural properties. But for Thomas Moore good is something that which cannot be reduced into natural properties. In his opinion good is non-natural and it cannot be defined. It is a primitive and a simple concept. If at all it has to be defined, it can be defined only in analytical properties. For example, bachelors are unmarried. The predicate is already contained in the subject.

There are two types of reduction: conceptual and metaphysical. Conceptual reduction is what it signifies. For example, a doctor means somebody at service, but in reality it is not necessary that they should be at service all the time. Metaphysical reduction deals with what it is. For example, Prathap is my cousin, water is H₂O. When I say “good,” it cannot be metaphysical but conceptual. Good does not contain the value in its very being. Not all metaphysical things can be explained in analytical properties. In the example given to the metaphysical reduction, cousin is not contained in the being of Prathap, but in the example of conceptual reduction the predicate is already contained in the subject, so it is analytical properties. So only through analytical properties (in relation to the other) good can be defined.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) State Moore's position on Non-Naturalism.

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2) What is Logical Positivism?

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3) Clarify the stand point of Realism.

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4) What is the psychological challenge by David Hume?

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5) What is Non-natural? How can it be defined?

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6) What is the argument from intuition?

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1.9 LET US SUM UP

Each one of these theses has an advantage which is also the principal difficulty of the other. The advantage of objectivism is that it makes it possible to make judgments owing to the fact that as regards morals, one is right or wrong. It is a point to which we seem to hold when it comes to morals and is in agreement with some of our intuitions of common sense. We do ask ourselves what our moral decisions should be in such and such situation. We wonder if we should lie or not in a given situation, what should we do with our money, time, life etc. By raising these questions, we assume that they have answers. If we hesitate between two actions and wonder which one is morally better to choose, we presume that one of them is indeed morally better than the other. This means that we generally tend to think that there are actions that are *objectively* better than others. Retrospectively, we often wonder “did I make the right choice?” Lastly, we sometimes discuss ethical issues with others with the presumption that we are right. We seek to convince others by rational means with the assumption that our opinions are good. Therefore, in a general way, we suppose that in matters of ethics, we can be right or wrong. Moral objectivism thus makes it possible to account for our actions: we are right when our evaluative judgments are true, and they are true when they correspond to objective values. In other words, moral objectivists can apply to ethics the same criteria of objectivity as scientists who apply it in science: Our statements are true by virtue of objective facts of the world. Just as the statement “it rains” is true if and only if it rains, the statement “it is bad to lie” is true if and only if it is in fact, bad to lie. The objectivists argue the value judgments, as we have seen, are expressed not in imperative form like in normative judgments, but in indicative form. The evaluative statements have a classical descriptive form. “Romeo is generous” or “Othello is rancorous”, have the same form as “Julie is blond” or “the earth is round”. Apparently these are statements that describe the factual state of affairs, which can be true or false. The fact that the evaluative statements seem to aspire for truth, there is a reason in favor of objectivism.

Inversely, the anti-objectivists do not find sufficient grounds to explain why in matter of ethics, some can be right while others are wrong. For them, ethics is a matter of taste, of appreciation, and as goes the proverb “taste and colors are of personal preference”. Ethics, therefore, is not an affair of beliefs, of true or false, but an affair of desire: things have values or not depending on if we like them or not. And our desires and preferences are beyond dispute: they are neither true nor false. There is no such thing as a “false desire” or a “false” preference, because we cannot evaluate desires with the ell of what is in the world: most of the time,

it can even be necessary, we desire what do not exist. Desire is on the same equal footing as truth. If ethics is all about all our desires, how do we account for moral judgments which presuppose that we can either be right or be wrong?

But anti-objectivists argue from the practical aspect of ethics. An essential aspect of ethics is that our morals convictions make impact on our actions. Ethics is not purely a theoretical activity disconnected from action. What we believe to be morally good or bad determines (at least partly) what we are willing to do. Ethics is not purely contemplative, if so we would be satisfied only to know what true values are. It intends to have a practical impact. However, *objectivists precisely seem to reduce ethics to an enterprise of knowledge by neglecting its practical aspect*. While insisting on beliefs over desires, on truth over action, on the world as it is over the world as it should be, objectivists make of ethics a purely contemplative discipline. As opposed to this, the anti-objectivists, while insisting on the role of individual preferences and desires in matters of ethics, help us connect better our preferences to actions and better understand why ethics leads us to act in one way rather than another way. Ethics is not a subject matter of contemplation, but of action. If there are objective values, we can at best contemplate them. The contrary, that is, to proceed to values from our desires enables us to explain the motivating nature of the latter.

To resume, if objectivism can well explain the possibility of error in ethics, it cannot sufficiently explain the relation between morals and actions. On the contrary, the anti-objectivists explain this relation better, but do not sound convincing when it comes to the discussion of if one can be right or wrong in ethical issues. Ethics is related both to truth and to action. We would like to be able to hold on to both ends of the string. But apparently, insisting on truth leads to the loss of its relation to action and it is also true of the opposite. This tension constitutes a constant background of our presentation of debates between objectivists and anti-objectivists. This debate, in the last analysis, concerns meta-ethics. Our preoccupation is not to know what true values are, but to know if objective values exist (whatever these values may be). If we succeed to defend the existence of objective moral values, then we can wonder which values are objective. In other words, the meta-ethical objectivism seems to be a necessary precondition to the study of normative ethics: if there are no objective values, it is useless to ask if abortion is good or bad.

1.10 KEY WORDS

- Truisms** : a statement that is clearly true and does not therefore add anything interesting or important to a discussion.
- Intrinsic** : belonging to or part of the real nature of something or somebody.
- Extrinsic** : not belonging naturally to somebody or something; coming from or existing outside somebody or something rather than within them.
- Consequentialism** : school of thought that gives importance to judgment on actions of a person and not to the person. Action is judged not the person.
- Cognitivism** : represents schools of thought which say whether all moral judgments or statements are true or false.

1.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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