

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College
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Lecture Notes: September 8

I. We continue to consider the following logical truth:

Either there is:

- A) no morality;
- B) exactly one morality; or
- C) more than one morality.

As we said last week, A), moral nihilism, seems incoherent.

Relativism, B), is much more compelling, for various reasons.

Remember, relativism can take either of two forms. One can say morality is relative to one's culture, which is called culturalism. Or, one can say that morality depends on the individual, which is called subjectivism, and is tricky to distinguish from nihilism.

II. Some reasons one might favor ethical relativism:

1) Everyone does decide for themselves how to act.

This could be misinterpreted as an argument for relativism.

2) We learn ethics from those around us, from society.

Since there are different moral codes in different societies, it seems plausible that people might end up believing different moralities.

3) If ought implies can, and it is hard or impossible to act in opposition to one's culture, morality can't really transcend culture.

4) Relativism may explain differences in practices among diverse cultures.

Some societies accept polygamy, marriage of children, slavery, homosexuality.

People who live in these societies accept these practices.

Consider the Betty/Sarah examples from Shaw, pp 82-3.

5) Relativism seems to be a respectful attitude toward other cultures, and we want to be respectful.

See Midgley, p 78.

But there are problems with relativism.

Midgley calls this position 'moral isolationism', since it isolates each society's morality from others.

III. Problems with Ethical Relativism

1) It prevents us from praising other cultures.

Consider what we might think of a country with universal health care coverage, or with high literacy rates.

In order to praise a culture, we have to be able to understand it.

And if we understand it, we can evaluate it.

2) Similarly, relativism prevents us from criticizing other cultures.

Consider the Aztecs, who practiced ritual human sacrifice.

Midgley provides the example of tsujigiri: trying out one's new sword on a passing stranger.

We don't really want to respect other cultures so much that we're willing to accept such heinous practices.

These two problems also apply to ethical nihilism.

3) Relatedly, relativism makes each society perfect, and so prevents us from seeing change as progress.

E.g. the end of slavery.

If right and wrong are determined by the culture, there is no position in which to stand to evaluate the culture itself.

Midgley argues that we can maintain respect without lapsing into isolationism and relativism.

Understanding of other cultures is necessary, and possible, if a little bit of hard work.

This understanding allows us to both praise and criticize other cultures.

We want to be isolationists to avoid hypocrisy and judgmentalism.

We can show respect, instead, by not passing crude, untutored judgments.

See Midgley, p 79.

In fact, Midgley argues, in order to try to defend isolationism, we lapse into applying our own standards.

We defend the samurai by appeal to honor and discipline.

We hypothesize the victim's consent.

These show that we aren't really isolationists.

The only way we can defend isolationism is to abandon it.

Similarly, we can explain the social differences in morality without appeal to relativism.

See Shaw, p 83.

We appeal to factors like utility, expectations, responsibility, fairness, rights.

These may be seen as universal.

In every society, we have responsibilities, and must meet them.

The specifics of our duties vary, but not that we must fulfill such duties as exist.

Furthermore, it doesn't seem that condemnation of a society is sufficient to determine morality.

That is, even if one's actions conflict with the dominant morality of a culture, a further argument is needed to show that that action is wrong.

We don't think it really immoral for someone to breach the mores of a culture, if those aren't really ethical standards.

E.g. intercourse on Sundays, from Shaw, p 83

4) Problems of majority rule.

5) Problems of overlapping societies.

Shaw discusses these two, which apply more clearly to cultural relativism, rather than subjectivism.

They are problems of determining what the mores of the dominant culture are.

6) The incoherence of relativism.

This is an important philosophical problem with all kinds of relativism.

E.g. relativism about truth.

Is the claim that all truth is relative itself an absolute truth?

Consider: 'All moral claims are relative.'

This is a moral claim.

So, is it relative?

If it isn't, then at least one truth is not relative, and so perhaps there are others.
If it is, then perhaps the truths of morality are the exception.
That is, relativism is self-refuting!

IV. The inability to praise and criticize other cultures is the most serious problem with ethical relativism. Consider this description of the massacres in Rwanda, in 1995:

Encouraged by political and civic leaders, the massacring of Tutsis spread from region to region. Following the militia's example, Hutus young and old rose to the task. Neighbors hacked neighbors to death in their homes, and colleagues hacked colleagues to death in their workplaces. Priests killed their parishioner, and elementary-school teachers killed their students. Many of the largest massacres occurred in churches and stadiums where Tutsis had sought refuge - often at the invitation of local authorities, who then oversaw their execution. In mid-April, at least five thousand Tutsis were packed in the Gatwaro Stadium, in the western city of Kibuye; as the massacre there began, gunmen in the bleachers shot zigzag waves of bullets and tossed grenades to make the victims stampede back and forth before militiamen waded in to finish the job with machetes.

Throughout Rwanda, mass rape and looting accompanied the slaughter. Militia bands, fortified with potent banana beer and assorted drugs, were bused from massacre to massacre. Hutu prisoners were organized in work details to clear cadavers. Radio announcers reminded listeners to take special care to disembowel pregnant victims. As an added incentive to the killers, Tutsis' belongings were parceled out in advance - the radio, the couch, the goat, the opportunity to rape a young girl. A councilwoman in one Kigali neighborhood was reported to have offered fifty Rwandese francs apiece (about 30 cents at the time) for severed heads, a practice known as "selling cabbages". (*The New Yorker*, December 18, 1995)
Or, closer to home, the terror attacks of 9/11/01

If you think that there's something immoral here, you can't go for nihilism or relativism.
You must be an absolutist.

Shaw argues that appeals to reason-giving are essential to the establishment of a moral position, pp 84-5. We consider the Rwanda case, and respond by thinking of reasons why such behavior is wrong. These reasons push us away from relativism.
On cultural relativism, the only reasons required are the dictates of the culture.
They can be seen as the basis for a universal morality.

So, let's put aside relativism (and skepticism) and, for the remainder of the course, adopt, at least tentatively, absolutism.

We've now put God, nihilism, and relativism behind us.