

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2005
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Lecture Notes, February 7

We finished last Wednesday's class by considering whether one should accept:

- A) Moral Nihilism; or
- B) Moral Absolutism; or
- C) Moral Relativism.

I. Moral Nihilism

Nihilism seems incoherent.

If there is no right and wrong, even for ourselves, then it is puzzling that we use these terms as motivations.

These terms must be mere expressions of bare, unjustified preference.

Contrast ethics with food preferences, about which we are nihilistic.

If we prefer broccoli to chocolate, we do not think that we do because broccoli is really better tasting.

Further, we do not think that these reasons apply to others.

We can urge someone to consider different preferences, but after that, it is up to them to decide.

Furthermore, if we decide we would prefer chocolate to broccoli, one day, we have not changed our minds about whether one is better tasting than the other.

Morality seems different.

When we choose not to rape or murder, we do not think of it as a mere preference.

We may just be conditioned to think in terms of right and wrong, even though there is no such thing.

Some of what we might be tempted to think of as nihilism may be better interpreted as moral subjectivism.

Nihilism says that right and wrong are illusions.

Subjectivism says that right and wrong are real, but only for the individual.

The differences are subtle.

The nihilist can never make moral errors, though the subjectivist might.

II. Ethical relativism

Remember, ethical relativism can take either of two forms.

One can say morality is relative to one's culture, which is called cultural relativism.

Or, one can say that morality depends on the individual, which is called subjectivism.

Five 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.

There are different moral codes in different societies.

It seems plausible that people might believe different actions are right and wrong.

3) Society and family act as support for difficult moral decisions.

A brief aside:

Many moral theorists assume that our moral requirements can not be more demanding than we can meet.

If we are morally required to perform an act, we must be able to actually perform it.

If an act is impossible, then it can not be morally required.

This is roughly equivalent to the claim that morality is possible.

For, if an act were impossible but morally required, then there would be no way for me to be moral.

For instance, if I were morally required to end the war in Iraq myself, then there would be no way for me to behave morally.

We sometimes summarize this position as, "Ought implies can."

It is difficult to act in opposition to one's culture and family.

If it were impossible to do so, and if ought implies can, then morality could only be relative to a 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, p 38.

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

See Midgley, p 33.

Midgley calls this relativism "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.

Both relativism and nihilism remove the ability to debate.

They make each individual, at every time, perfect. See Shaw, p 37.

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 34.

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 are not 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 38.

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 38.

4) Problems of majority rule.

Consider an issue on which a society is divided.

It may switch from right to wrong and back, as the opinion of the majority changes.

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 is not, 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!