

MORAL RELATIVISM AND RELIGION*

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Ethical theory has mostly ignored a vast domain of human moral experience in attempting to solve the well entrenched philosophical dispute of relativism. What has generally been ignored is religion. Most discussion of religion and ethics has centered around whether divine command theory is plausible. Whether or not ethics can be grounded on the will or commandments of a deity has preoccupied most ethical literature. References are also often made to conflicting religious belief systems to support relativism but the common religious values are often disregarded. What the discussion has overlooked is the significance of the fact of the existence of religion and its common moral beliefs.

This essay argues that there is a common core of values in the main world religions which support the rationality of these values for several reasons. One reason that will not be used is that any one of these religions is true and divinely inspired; nor will the existence of any god or divine being be assumed or denied. Rather, the argument is that religions, whatever else they may be, are a dimension of humanity's creative ability to develop institutions which help societies meet their many needs and promote social order and survival.

This thesis may seem obviously wrong to many. The obvious point against it seems to be that there are many disagree-

* I am grateful to the editor and outside reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.

ments about morality in these religions as well as in other beliefs and rituals. There are disagreements to be sure, but there are also major agreements about values which are often overlooked. Let us first get clear on what relativism holds and why.

There are several kinds of relativism.¹ Descriptive or cultural relativism is the factual claim that there are disagreements about morality in different cultures and different times even within one culture. The other important kind of relativism is ethical relativism. This view as held by noncognitivists is the claim that there is no one correct rational moral system or set of value. Some defend ethical relativism on the grounds of epistemological relativism arguing that objective knowledge in general is impossible in all areas and therefore in ethics as well. Other relativists argue that the meaning of moral terms such as "good" and "right" have meaning only within a given cultural framework and that two different cultural frameworks cannot be compared. They claim we cannot judge another society's moral values for that is "right" for them and their circumstances.

This type of relativism holds that moral codes function to maintain a particular society in existence and it further holds that to maintain two different societies takes different moral norms.

What all these relativisms have in common is the view that there are no rational, objective, unchanging or universal moral principles. They deny moral absolutism, the view that there is one right and unchanging moral code for all people. Relativists hold that there is no rational way to justify one moral code as objectively correct or rationally superior to another.

The position defended here is that there are significant uniformities and less significant differences in moral systems which can be explained as follows: Similarities in core values are a function of the universality of certain human needs, tendencies and the common problems persons must solve to

¹ Relativism must not be confused with ethical skepticism. Ethical skepticism is a total rejection of morality as meaningless and without any sound foundation. See Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *Philosophical Review*, 84, 1975, pp. 3-22; Sumner, William G., *Folkways*, Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*.

meet their survival needs.² The differences arise due to the fact that moral systems emerge in different social and historical contexts and exist as part of larger belief systems which give them their particular character. It will be argued that these differences are secondary when compared to the larger common foundation of core values.

There are several reasons usually offered for moral relativism.³ First, there is the fact of cultural relativism. We know from the study of history and sociology that different societies have had and continue to have different moral codes. There are many examples in history of moral practices we would probably find immoral —cannibalism, human sacrifice, slavery, bribery, racism, and sexism. An extreme case of sexism is shown in the ancient and now abandoned Hindu custom of *sati* (the obligation of widows to be burnt at their husbands cremation). Can we objectively and rationally show these are immoral? There are many seemingly hopeless disagreements today even in our own society about abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, capital punishment, among others. Can these controversies be resolved rationally? Relativism believes not.

Another reason for relativism is the lack of an agreed upon foundation for ethics. Some use religion, others appeal to reason and, still others, use human nature to base ethics on. Is there a universal human nature or not? Are differences among people as great as differences among cultures? Can abstract reason supply substantive moral norms? There is even disagreement about whether ethics is a rational enterprise as emotivists, existentialists and of course, relativists have argued.

Some relativists argue that relativism is necessary for tolerance and respect of other cultures. Respect excludes ethnocentrism, the belief that one's culture is the best and others are inferior and have no rights. Respect and tolerance of other societies, relativists claim, require that we believe other societies are just as good as our own.

² This essay draws from my paper "The Social Basis of Morality," *The Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 26, N.2, Fall 1995, pp. 81-93.

³ McInerney, Peter K. and George W. Rainbolt, *Ethics*, New York: Harper Collins, 1994, pp. 33-5.

Another argument for relativism is the argument from fairness. The view here is that most people are only aware of the moral system of their own society; to judge them by an absolute standard is unfair since they are not aware of it.

Finally, relativists question the credibility and nature of absolute standards. How and where do these standards exist? Are they Platonic Forms or Ideas and if so, how do we know what these Forms are, how do they exist and relate to this world? If God's will is the source of these standards, can we know God exists and why are there differences among religions? If reason is the basis of absolute standards, why do philosophers disagree about what reason demands?

Do these reasons establish the truth of ethical or cultural relativism? No. First, the factual claim of cultural relativism and moral disagreements does not establish the normative claim of moral relativism just as past disagreements between the heliocentric and geocentric beliefs establishes that there is no objectively correct view. Second, many of the disagreements about moral issues come from disagreements about the "facts", not values.

For example, some Eskimo tribe had the custom of abandoning its aged parents to die. Our society would probably condemn this as probably murder. However, the reason this tribe did this is their belief that the quality of the after life of their aged parents is related to the quality of their lives when they died. So if they died senile and seriously infirm, they would have the same weaknesses in the after life. The abandonment of their parents before this happened was their way of promoting a good after life. Here, there is no difference in respect for parents but a difference about whether there is an after life or how one assures that the after life is good.

Relativists are also wrong because the facts show that although there are disagreements in morality, there are also basic agreements about universal values as will be shown.

The matter of the lack of an agreed upon foundation is also unwarranted as argued here. The foundation argued for here is that moral values are the necessary conditions for human survival, social co-existence and order.

The question of tolerance and respect for other cultures is an important one. The problem here is that relativists contradict themselves if they hold tolerance as an absolute. Secondly, respect does not require absolute tolerance. Can we tolerate a society that is itself not tolerant of other societies? Should we tolerate a racist and slave practicing society? Should the British have tolerated the custom of *sati*? Respect means to value the lives of people, not necessarily every practice and belief they happen to have at a time. Indeed, respect would imply a reasoned attempt to convince another society to give up cruel and irrational practices, difficult though this may be.

The issue of fairness is not relevant to the issue of relativism. Fairness is concerned with judging another person's behavior, not the truth of the moral code they were socialized into believing. Fairness requires we judge another based on their knowledge at the time of the action, just as we do not judge children and the insane with the same standard as the sane adult.

If relativism is an inadequate theory, what reasons are there for absolutism, the view that there are universal values? Sociological and anthropological evidence reveals that all societies have a common core of moral values.⁴ This core consists of: 1) prohibition of murder or the killing of in-group members except within parameters specified in the group (e.g. as punishment, self-defense, or other socially accepted rituals); 2) prohibition of random bodily violence, harm or insults (harm to prestige or self-esteem); 3) rules requiring some degree of work from the able bodied to meet survival needs; 4) a prohibition of theft and establishment of some level of private property; 5) rules requiring some level of care for others, especially infants, the old and infirm; 6) knowledge is valued at least as far as assisting in the provision of food, shelter and healing illness; 7) truth telling and promise keeping are generally valued except in specific cases; 8) the encouragement of some form of marriage and mating where sexual needs are met, reproduction and nurture of children take place; 9) some

⁴ Linton, Ralph, "Universal Ethical Principles: An Anthropological View" in *Moral Principles of Action*, ed. by R. N. Anshen, V 6, Harper, 1952, pp. 645-59.

restrictions on sexual intercourse with the rule against incest most universal.

The mere fact of agreement, of course, does not establish these agreed upon values as valid; reasons must be offered why this agreement is not a coincidence but a necessity; this is the burden of our thesis.

The above observations of anthropology are supported by the moral codes of the world religions. All religions provide moral norms which organize and structure the community, limit self interest and control anti-social behavior. Although the existing main world religions cover a span of over four thousand years and the entire globe with diverse climates, and circumstances and have diverse theologies, and rituals, there is a common core of values in all of them.⁵ Hinduism, Judaism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, reject murder, stealing, lying, gossip, hypocrisy, idleness, ignorance, selfishness, adultery and promiscuity.

The rules found in the Ten Commandments accepted by Judaism and Christianity echo many of these values. The commandments state, among other rules, "... Honor your father and your mother. You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not covet your neighbor's house ... or anything that is your neighbor's" (Exodus, 20. 1-17).

Similarly the religion of Islam founded by Mohammed in the seventh century has a moral code similar to Judaism and Christianity. The moral teachings are summarized in what are called the Five Pillars of Islam: 1) Belief in one God, Allah, and accept Mohammed as His prophet; 2) Pray five times daily; 3) Give alms to the poor; 4) Fast during the month of Ramadan; 5) Make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in life. The Koran, the holy scriptures of Islam states: "Be good to your parents, ... Approach not lewd behavior, ... Take not life, ... Approach not the property of the orphan, ... Give full

⁵ See C.J. Ducasse's *A Philosophical Scrutiny of Religion*, New York: The Ronald Press, 1953, pp. 130-47; Peter Donovan, "Do Different Religions Share a Common Moral Ground?", *Religious Studies*, 22, March 1986, pp. 370-75. Quotations from religious scripture are from *World Scripture*, New York: Paragon House, 1991.

measure and weight in justice, ... If you give your word, do it justice ... and fulfill your obligations before God" (Koran, 6.151-53).

The Hindu religion, the oldest religion still practiced today, also supports many of these same ideas. It requires: "Nonviolence, truthfulness, not stealing, purity, control of the senses" (Laws of Manu 10.63).

The Eightfold Path of Buddhism is a list of moral and meditation practices and rules: 1) Have right knowledge (especially understand the Four noble Truths and what they mean); 2) Right thought (avoid desire, envy, jealousy); 3) Right speech (no lying or boasting); 4) Right conduct (no killing of any living thing, no theft, no sexual impurity); 5) Right work (not being a butcher, alcohol seller, prostitute or slave trader); 6) Right efforts, self confidence, courage, will-power); 7) Right mindfulness, control thoughts, discipline the mind); 8) Right concentration (meditate and achieve enlightenment or Nirvana) (Sermon at Benares).

The Golden Rule is another virtually universal moral principle. It is called golden because it is widely considered the foundation of all other moral rules. In Hinduism we have "One should not behave toward others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself" (Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva 113.8). The New Testament has: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" (Matthew 7.12). Confucius defended what is sometimes called the Silver Rule, the negative version of the Golden Rule: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (Analects 15.23).

As John Hick points out, the notion of "saint" in all the world religions has a common core.⁶ This core is the idea of someone who has overcome selfishness to a great degree and has compassion for others. Clearly, as indicated above by the Golden Rule and other rules, control of unlimited self-interest is a major concern of religion.

The agreement in basic morals found in religion is not to say that the world religions were correct in all their moral

⁶ Hick, John, *An Interpretation of Religion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 301-3.

teachings. For one, there are also well known disagreements among the various denominations of the main religions. For example, some Christians accept the morality of abortion while others do not. Secondly, slavery, sexism and ethnocentrism are prevalent in past societies and even to this day. Many of these differences are no doubt due to differences in "factual" beliefs about the cosmos, human nature and the like. Some are due to false beliefs such as the innate inferiority of some peoples used to defend slavery. Still other practices may be due to irrational tendencies such as ethnocentrism and prejudice.⁷ Others may be due to social and political circumstances. For example, a warlike society may have a shortage of men when it comes to marriage. This may lead to polygyny or plural wives as a way of ensuring the proper care of women.

One must still explain why there are moral values at all and why do they have the similarities they do have. Is this just a coincidence? No, the existence of moral norms and similarities can best be explained as the solution to the problem of human co-existence in a socially enduring manner. Morality is the answer to the problem of maintaining social order among members of a species which both need others and at the same time are not genetically programmed (as, say, bees are) to cooperate. Moral norms channel human impulses and actions into ordered relations with the actions of others. They constitute a structure of instrumental rules or guidelines which define appropriate means for the achievement of human ends in a social environment. In other words, moral norms correspond to necessary social structures wherein a group of individuals with some anti-social tendencies continue to exist as a society with minimal conflict and inefficiency in meeting the needs of its members.

Human social order is threatened by possible conflicts. The basic reason for this is that, in humans, social order is necessary but not genetically specified or guaranteed. This possibility for anti-social behavior results in part because human be-

⁷ See my paper "Errors in Moral Reasoning," *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Winter, 1996.

ings have limited empathy. Anti-social activity is also due to the scarcity of desired objects (food, wealth, love, status, etc.).

These conditions when combined with the fact that persons are born dependent and continue so for some years, the vulnerability of all including adults to attack by others and the fact that persons are roughly equal in physical and intellectual abilities point for rules to structure social existence.

These aspects of the human condition may produce conflict when individuals pursue their self-interest, i.e., the satisfaction of their needs to ensure their welfare, outside the social parameters which constitute morality. These parameters create the stability of expectations that reduce conflict and insecurity. This equilibrium promotes a more efficient satisfaction of needs since the additional time and energy that would be necessary to protect one's goods, significant others and oneself in the absence or erosion of social control provided by the general compliance with moral norms can be used to satisfy needs or pursue other activities. Hence, the structuring effect of moral limits in addition to promoting survival in the extreme case by preventing chaos, also promotes greater general efficiency. Moral norms then, are the solution to persons seeking the satisfaction of their needs in a social context without producing the Hobbesian state of war of all against all; a situation, presumably, where the likelihood of satisfying one's needs is even more improbable. Moral norms constitute the "glue" that counteracts the centrifugal forces of unlimited self-interest.

Moral norms, then, although variously justified, have the same social function. They are social constructs which channel human impulses, needs and desires into ordered relations with the desires of others. This limits the area of the unknown and unpredictable, reducing the frustration of expectations and minimizing conflict. This analysis of the formal traits of moral norms is supported by an examination of the universal core moral content listed above.

Human beings have needs which must be satisfied if they are to survive and be healthy. Although needs are conditioned to some degree by one's culture, survival remains the most basic need. Survival is contingent upon restricting violence

among group members, hence the prohibition of murder and random violence.

Since human infants are born in absolute dependence and incapable of providing for themselves, there must be norms requiring the care and nurture of children. Hence the presence of some form of the family. Furthermore, given the vicissitudes of life (especially in primitive and barter societies where amassing of wealth is very limited), the norm requiring aid and assistance at least to the closest relations or in-group members is also a rationally based norm.

Similarly, there must be some incentives for work to provide food and shelter. The care and management of assets and the provision of food calls for the corresponding rules protecting some level of private property. Total idleness and theft would also have to be judged immoral and discouraged.

Since human beings are by nature sexual beings, sexual mating must be at least allowed for some members if the group is to meet this basic impulse and replace deceased members with new persons. All societies consider some varieties of sexual expression good or (for more ascetic societies) at least acceptable and value offspring.

For a society to continue to survive it must adapt to its environment and solve problems. Adaptation and problem solving require knowledge and reliable information for finding and preparing food, building shelter and caring for infants and healing the sick. Collective efforts require decision making and cooperation to implement decisions. Cooperation requires communication which, in turn, requires a rule requiring truth-telling in at least most collective endeavors; random lying would eliminate trust and produce social chaos. Simply put, survival implies knowledge and cooperation, and knowledge implies adherence to truth and rejection of lying.

Norms defining sexual interactions exist in all societies. The general prohibition against incest is virtually universal (definitions vary and exceptions usually exist in some primitive societies only for royal or priestly groups). Its basis rests in part on the need to integrate the society more fully by developing marital ties with other family units. In addition, pro-

hibition of incest is advantageous for individual and family security in that having extended relations can be helpful in times of need. Although probably not apparent to pre-scientific cultures, modern science has shown the genetic benefits of exogamy. Although rules specifying pre and extra-marital relations differ more than many other norms, restrictions are always present partly to minimize disruptive emotions and partly to make ascriptions of fatherhood, and thus responsibilities for care, more reliable.

The scope of this common normative core is even more remarkable when one considers that widely divergent religious and philosophical belief systems accept them. Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and others, which have such radically incompatible ontologies, theologies and rituals share the common values (life, knowledge, truth, friendship) mentioned above.

Emile Durkheim and others have pointed out, religions are a glue that unites a society and reduce anti-social activity such as crime and despair. According to Durkheim, religious belief systems developed to ensure social solidarity which facilitates human adaptation and cooperation. Durkheim claims that moral values, common beliefs and rituals unify a society and help people deal with situations that could lead to antisocial activity.

The truth of the metaphysical claims of religions go beyond the scope of this paper, but the core values of the world religions show that in at least this domain, they are mostly in the right. If the core moral teachings of the main world religions were seriously in error, the societies which adopted them would not have survived for long. Survival over thousands of years is a good pragmatic argument for the truth of the basic values they hold.

Here, it may be helpful to look at the different religions in terms of what John S. Mill called "experiments in living."⁸ Mill used this idea in the context of individuals living different lifestyles but the concept can be expanded to cover the ways of life of entire peoples. Some experiments fail and some suc-

⁸ Mill, J. S., *On Liberty*, p. 21.

ceed. There are many religions which have survived for thousands of years but this doesn't mean they are all true in everything they believe. The segments of religious belief systems that are most directly tested by life and survival needs are those that have practical consequences and thus relate to human existence most immediately; these are obviously the beliefs and habits that guide action, namely, moral beliefs. Whether God is one or three in one, whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son or the Father alone, are theological claims that, as Buddha argued, do not essentially relate to how life is lived. It is the moral system which determines whether a society can maintain order and allow its members to survive.

This consensus does not deny the great disagreements that exist in our society and among societies. Issues such as abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia will likely continue because of differences in beliefs in religion, experience and general philosophies. Though rationality can go some distance to resolve these disputes, no doubt as long as there are different comprehensive doctrines there will be disagreements. But just as John Rawls has argued that these differences may allow for political consensus, these differences do not preclude social order.⁹ A pluralistic and dynamic society will obviously not have the same degree of cohesion as many primitive societies, but that is not problematic as long as the basic needs of survival and minimal order are maintained.

As Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas have argued, ethics flows naturally from our nature as beings who are not genetically determined to act in one way and therefore need moral norms as guidelines. Ethics also flow from the fact that we are creatures who need others for love, friendship, support and wisdom. But without trust, honesty, sharing and compassion our need for others would be suicidal. Although we live today in a diverse and pluralistic world with many disputes, many of the problems that confront humanity are universal and so are the values which flow from our needs, limitations and abilities.

⁹ Rawls, John, *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993, pp. 150-54.

One central ability we have is rationality, which casts a long shadow and whose power has yet to be exhausted.

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