

Phil 2, March 8, 2011

Moral Skepticism: there are no moral truths, somehow prior to and independent of us, that all of us must accept.

1. If we abandon religious belief, must we be moral skeptics? If we accept religious belief, do we necessarily avoid moral skepticism?

Some skeptics are skeptics because they see religion as the only other option, and they find religion implausible. Some religious believers are believers because they see skepticism as the only other option, and they find skepticism repellent.

Both sides seem to accept:

There are moral truths that everyone must accept if and only if there is a God (or gods) who lays down the law.

We focus on one half:

If there is a God (or gods) who lays down the law, then there are moral truths that everyone must accept.

If this claim is false, then religious belief is not necessarily a way of avoiding skepticism.

John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*:

To decide what moral rights people have, we have to figure out what rights God intended them to have.

Puzzle: Suppose there is a God. Why are we morally required to abide by what He intends for us?

Locke's answer: "And Reason, which is [the Law of Nature] teaches all Mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions. For Men being all the Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; All the Servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the World by his order and about his business, they are his Property, whose Workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's Pleasure."

In other words: Why should we care about what God intended for men? Because God made men. And since He alone made men, they are His sole property. And since they are His sole property, He alone has the right to decide what happens to them. We must respect God's intentions for men, because God owns men, and we must respect God's property rights.

Difficulty: This argument presupposes that we must respect others' property. Where does this moral truth come from?

General lesson: In order to explain our duty to do what God commands, we need some moral rule of the form:

If you have relation R to X, then you must do what X says.

For Locke, relation R might be: “being the workmanship, and hence the property of.” For others, relation R might be: “having entered into a covenant with” or “having received great benefits from.” It doesn’t matter which we choose. The point stays the same. We cannot explain our duty to follow this moral rule by saying that God told us to follow this rule and we have a duty to do what God says, because this moral rule is supposed to explain why we have a duty to do what God says in the first place.

Plato, *Euthyphro*:

Euthyphro’s definition: “What is dear to the gods is pious, what is not is impious.”

Socrates’ question: “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?”

Euthyphro’s answer: The gods love pious acts because they are pious.

Socrates’ objection: If the gods love pious acts because they are pious, then what makes them pious must be something prior to and independent of the gods’ love. The gods perceive that these acts are pious, and as a result come to love them. The gods respond to piety; they don’t determine what piety is. “Loved by the gods” can’t be a *definition* of “pious.”

A neglected alternative: Why not say that pious acts are pious because they are loved by the gods, not the other way around? Perhaps because this would make piety seem entirely arbitrary.

Summary: In reading Locke and Plato, we have come across some puzzles about how divine will could explain moral truths. The basic problem is that the view that moral truths result from divine will seems to presuppose that there are some moral truths that do not result from divine will: that there are some moral truths that were already there anyway. So instead of the conditional:

If there is a God (or gods) who lays down the law, then there are moral truths that everyone must accept,

we seem to have the tautology:

If there is a God (or gods) who lays down the law *and there are moral truths that everyone must accept*, then there are moral truths that everyone must accept.

If we’re puzzled about how there could be moral truths that everyone had to accept, then invoking Divine Will may not help.

2. If we are moral skeptics, does it follow that we ought to tolerate alien moral practices?

Williams on “vulgar relativism”

“In its vulgar and unregenerate form,” Williams writes, “relativism” consists of the following three propositions:

- (1) “Right” means “right for a given society.”
- (2) “Right for a given society” is to be understood in a functionalist sense.
- (3) Therefore, it is wrong for people in one society to condemn, interfere with, etc., the values of another society.

Williams spies an immediate problem with (3). (3) uses “wrong” in a universal, or nonrelative, sense—i.e., wrong no matter what your society is—, whereas (1) claims that “wrong” has only a relative sense—i.e., wrong only in this society. The closest thing to (3) that (1) will allow is:

- (4) It is wrong *for us* to condemn, interfere with, etc., the values of another society.

Why can’t the relativist rewrite (3) as the long conjunction of claims using the relative sense of “wrong”?

- (5) It is wrong for us to condemn, etc., the values of another society, and it is wrong for the Ashanti to condemn, etc., the values of another society, and it is wrong for the Ancient Greeks to condemn, etc., the values of another society (and so on for every society).

This list seems pretty close to (3). So what’s the problem with this argument?

The problem might be that the vulgar relativist believes that what is right for a given society is determined by the beliefs and practices of that society. Suppose, then, that there is a society that has intolerant beliefs and practices: beliefs and practices that encourage the condemnation of and interference with the values of other societies. Take the Spanish in the New World. Then the vulgar relativist must say that it is not wrong for the Spanish to condemn, interfere with, etc. the values of another society. This claim *is* incompatible with (5)—which was our surrogate for (3).

And Williams’s vulgar relativist indeed believes that what is right for a given society is determined by the beliefs and practices of that society. For Williams’s vulgar relativist accepts (2), which says that “right for a given society” is to be understood in a functionalist sense. Now, what Williams means by this, I take it, is that what is right for a society is roughly whatever promotes the society’s survival. And presumably what promotes an established society’s survival are its beliefs and practices.

To sum up: If relativism holds that what is right for a given society depends on the beliefs and practices of that society, and if there has been (or could be) a society with beliefs and practices of intolerance of other societies, then relativism is *incompatible with* the claim that it is wrong for any society to be intolerant of other societies.

If relativism is *incompatible* with the universal principle of toleration, then either relativism is *false*, or it does *not entail* the universal principle of toleration. Why then is it so tempting to think that accepting relativism gets us the universal principle of toleration?

Here is one possibility. Suppose Cortez comes across an Aztec human sacrifice and says to himself: “I will stop what they are doing, because it is wrong for anyone to engage in human

sacrifice.” If we are relativists, then we believe that Cortez is incorrect. It is not true that it is wrong for anyone to engage in human sacrifice. It is not wrong for the Aztecs, since that is their culture.

Notice, however, that we believe that Cortez is incorrect in the sense of having and acting on a *false belief*. It does not follow that Cortez is incorrect in the sense of doing anything *morally wrong*. In other words, if we are relativists, then we believe that anyone who interferes with members of another society on the grounds that they are violating a universal moral principle acts on the basis of a mistaken belief. But it does not follow that he acts morally wrongly. Still less, if he interferes with members of another society on *other* grounds, such as that he simply finds disagreement annoying.

Here is a second possibility. Suppose we are relativists. Cortez acts intolerantly, preventing the Aztecs from doing what, in our view, is right for Aztec society. And suppose we accept the vulgar relativist’s premise (2), which says that what is right for a society is what promotes its survival. Then we believe that Cortez has prevented the Aztecs from doing what promoted the survival of their society, thereby seriously harming the members of that society. Hence, as relativists, we believe that Cortez has done something wrong by acting intolerantly.

Notice, first, that this argument assumes that the cure is worse than the disease. Arguably, the benefit from abolishing human sacrifice outweighs the damage done to Aztec society. More importantly, this argument assumes a universal moral principle: that it is wrong for anyone to harm others. So it is itself incompatible with relativism.

In sum, relativism supports toleration only weakly, if at all. When we read John Stuart Mill’s classic, *On Liberty*, we will see whether universal moral principles—utilitarianism, in fact—might do a better job.

Review Questions:

1. “If there is God who created us, then that explains why there are universal moral truths, which everyone should accept. For if God created us, then we owe God a debt of gratitude. And if we owe some being a debt of gratitude, then we are morally required to do what that being wills.” Does this argument succeed?
2. “If relativism is true, then polygamy is right for polygamous cultures. In that case, if one interferes with polygamous cultures on the grounds that polygamy is wrong, one proceeds on the basis of a mistake. In that case, it is wrong to interfere with polygamous cultures. Therefore, if relativism is true, then it is wrong to interfere with polygamous cultures.” Does this argument succeed?