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Objective Values and the Relativity of Morals

In my book *Being and Worth*¹ I argue for objective real values; so what I have to explain – what is perhaps problematic for me – is what might be called the relativity of morals. By this I do not mean relativism, but simply the fact that different communities have different moral codes, and in complex communities, for instance the United Kingdom today, there are different moral codes even in what is in some sense the same community; or, to put it another way, there are different moral communities within the one community. This diversity of morals which is something which perhaps was not widely appreciated in western thought 200 years ago, is very widely known now, and is one of the grounds why a lot of people are relativists, in a sense which involves them denying what I am trying to argue for – namely that there are real values and there is an objective truth about what they are.

Explanations of moral diversity

So moral relativity or diversity is a fact. How do we explain it? There are three main explanations on offer within ethics. According to the first, there are objective values, but some, if not all, people get it wrong about them. This approach explains diversity in moral views in the same way as one would explain diversity about factual matters, namely, not everybody agrees because some people get it right and some people get it wrong, or possibly everybody gets it wrong in different ways; in either case the diversity is explained by error. The second sort of explanation holds that there are real reasons why some particular thing is right in one society and wrong in another – or why some particular human quality is a virtue in one society and a vice in another.

Neither of these views is strictly relativist. The first is that of anyone who straightforwardly holds that there are objective moral values and relativism is false. The second holds that some things really are right in some societies and wrong in others, and that there are reasons why in one society one thing is right and in another wrong; if we analyse these reasons we discover that there is some underlying value which is expressed by different judgements in the two different societies. So it is not really relativist, in the sense that the differences are explained by, usually, some kind of factual difference between the two societies.

The third explanation is typically relativist, but I shall claim it breaks down into three different sub-explanations. It is that different societies have different but equally good customs, each set being right for its own society simply because they are the customs for that society. Now that is typically the position that relativists take, but I think that if we look at examples for which these various accounts are plausible we will see that one doesn't need to take a relativist view in order to explain the relativity of morals.

Plausible examples

Here are examples about which the first account – that some things are just wrong but some societies get it wrong and think that they are right – is plausible: some societies accept slavery, others accept torture, and so on, others do not. One doesn't want to say that slavery was right in the ante-bellum south of the United States but is wrong in 20th century England; one wants to say, rather, that in the Deep South they got it wrong. One doesn't want to be a relativist about this, one wants to say straightforwardly that particular societies get certain judgements wrong: that the acceptance of torture in many modern societies, and also in medieval society and early modern society, was something wrong about those societies – and it was not just a different custom. In cases like that I think most people in practice, whatever they say in their study, accept that there are objective values.

The second case is where there are real reasons why one thing is good or a virtue in one society and its opposite in another society. I think there are plausible examples of that too. Take something like thrift, the tendency to save money. There are real reasons why this is a prudent quality to have in a capitalist society; and given that one may have responsibilities to other people it is possibly a morally good quality to have in such a society. It is not just that capitalist society judges it to be right or prudent; given the institutions of capitalist society it is right or prudent, yet in a feudal society or a socialist society it would be simply an aberration of a miser, a person who keeps money under their bed instead of using it. So this is something for which there is quite a good reason for regarding it as good in one society and bad in another. Now, in saying that it is good in one society and bad in another, one is looking at common principles governing what is good and bad applied differently because of different facts about the society. And therefore this seems not to be a relativist position. It is sometimes called relativism, but what it doesn't exclude is the position I am trying to defend, namely underlying values which are good in all possible societies or bad in all possible societies. It's rather like in science looking at what are the qualities of water and one might say that the quality of water is to be wet. But if by water you mean H₂O, it is only wet between 0° and 100° Celsius, below that it's a solid and above that it's a gas. But that doesn't mean that water has no common qualities; there are features of H₂O which are true whatever its temperature, but nevertheless it has different phenomenal qualities in different circumstances. There might be something like this about values in society; the same value may be realised by one set of virtues in one society and a different and even contradictory set in another society, and we can explain why. So for both these classes of examples my case for the objectivity of values remains fairly plausible.

The third kind of explanation

What about the third case, the case where we have equally good customs in one society as another, each right for its own society just because it is the custom of that society? When we come to look for examples we find it falls into three sub-categories.

The first is where it is just a matter of an indifferent custom, a custom which is indifferent in itself; it does not matter really which custom the society has – one society has one custom and another has another – for example, in England people don't eat horse flesh whereas in France they do. Now obviously there is a moral issue of a rather different order about whether one should eat meat at all, but I think we can bracket that because, from a moral point of view, if you are a vegetarian it is equally bad to eat horse flesh or beef, and if you are a meat eater then it is equally good to eat horse flesh or beef; yet the custom in England and in France is clearly different. I do not think that this is a moral issue at all. However much people in England may be disgusted by the eating of horse flesh, and the people in France not, the account to give for that is not a moral but an explanatory one. According to one such account, for the Anglo-Saxons the horse was a sacred animal which was sometimes ritually eaten, as a religious act; but when the Anglo-Saxons became converted to Christianity they gave up their horse feasts because this was a pagan practice and it became taboo and it has remained taboo ever since, even though the origins of this have long since disappeared into the mists of history. Whereas the French never had horses as a sacred animal and so this procedure never happened. Now if that is the explanation, it is an historical explanation, of a sort, but there is nothing moral about it. Basically the issue drops out of ethics altogether and becomes a different sort of issue. Therefore, although one can be relativist about it, one is not being relativist about ethics, because it is not a matter for ethics.

The second sort of example is provided by cases where something may actually be right or wrong in a society but only because it is a custom. This is not the case with horse flesh – it is not wrong to eat horse flesh in England, even though it is not the custom. But there may be cases where, just because something is the custom in a society, it is right (or wrong) in that society. A good example is decency in dress. There is nothing intrinsically good or bad about showing your face, or your torso or your whole body in public places; this is something about which different cultures have different rules. However, to break such rules would be at least highly questionable if not clearly wrong. In England, for instance, to engage in exhibitionism would be wrong, but in other cultures showing your face would be wrong and in yet other cultures going almost completely naked would not be. This is a matter which is indifferent in itself, but is nevertheless something which becomes a genuinely moral issue within a given culture. Now this account makes it look like the second kind of explanation discussed above, in which there are certain kinds of custom, to break which would be deeply offensive to the people around you, so there is an underlying principle to keep the custom: do not do things that are deeply offensive to the people around

you – a principle that is the same presumably for all societies, it is just that what is offensive is different in different societies. And indeed it is so. What seems to be a sub-category of the third kind of explanation, is really an example of the second kind, where things are wrong in one society but right in another because of differences in those societies, and there are underlying grounds which apply in both.

Underlying rights

Finally, there are things which are indifferent in themselves but about which there has to be some rule in society; there could be one rule or another – it is morally indifferent which – but there must be one or another. A perhaps trivial example of this is which side of the road people drive on; there must be a rule stipulating left or right, but it is completely morally indifferent which. Obviously it is wrong to disobey the rule of your own society on an issue like this, as well as extremely imprudent. But there might be more serious issues relating to different social structures. I remember as a child being extremely puzzled by the story in the gospels where the disciples are plucking corn and eating it as they walk through farmers' fields. They do this on the sabbath and get into trouble for it because it is an offense to work on the sabbath – the whole issue between the disciples and the pharisees is that it was done on the sabbath. It struck me that surely they were stealing, so is not this a rather more serious thing? But of course, as I later learnt, there were Hebrew laws which allowed it, such that it did not count as stealing. What counts as stealing depends on the rules of the particular society. The point is of course that you have to have some sort of rules, you could have alternative rules but there are certain things you could not have. You could logically, but perhaps not morally, have a rule which applied one criteria to some people and another to other people; an example of this might be the laws about hunting in pre-revolutionary France, where an aristocrat was allowed to hunt over other people's land but a non-aristocrat was not allowed to hunt on an aristocrat's land. While it seems it would be perfectly fair to have the rule that anybody can hunt over anybody's land, or that nobody can hunt over anybody's land but their own, it is clearly unfair to have the rule that aristocrats can hunt over anybody's land but nobody else can hunt over aristocrats' land. So you need one rule consistently applied, but it doesn't actually matter from a moral point of view (although it may matter from pragmatic points of view of various kinds) which rule you have, as long as its consistently applied. Now is this a case where relativism holds? I think not because, as the example from pre-revolutionary France shows, there is an underlying value here which is the value of justice and perhaps one of the two things Kant got right about ethics is that a just society means a society in which rights are observed. And rights can be different in different societies, but in order to be counted as rights at all it has to be something which everybody has. You could not have a right which some people have and other people do not; that would be a privilege, not a right, and privileges are essentially unjust. So there is an underlying principle of justice here; a fairly formal principle but one that does exclude

certain things, such as the laws that existed in France before the revolution. And this case also falls under category two, in which things are different in different societies, but there is a reason why they are different, and you explain them in terms of that reason plus some underlying principle which is true in all societies.

What are objective values?

So the relativity of morals does not prove that there are no objective values. But if there are objective values, what sort of things are they? We are clearly looking for something which has intrinsic value here, not something which has a value as a means to something else. What are the candidates? I think there are four kinds in the history of ethics, and I defend one of these. I shall say briefly why I think the other three are not good candidates.

The first example would be actions; things which have intrinsic value are certain kinds of actions and other actions have intrinsic disvalue. This is Kant's position. This view is often called intrinsicism because it says that what is good or bad about an action is intrinsic to the action, and does not concern its consequences. There is a long-standing debate in ethics between consequentialists, who say that what makes an action right or wrong is the consequences, and intrinsicists, who say that what makes an action right or wrong is the kind of action it is. Now my view on this debate is that it can't really even get started. Instead of coming down on one side or the other, I am going to try to criticise the whole terms of the debate, because it is actually impossible to specify what an action is without taking into account at least some of its consequences; the only issue is how full your account of its consequences is. Take the example of the shooting of the Archduke at Sarajevo which set off the First World War. How do you describe this action? You could describe it as an action of pulling a trigger, and that I take it is morally neutral. You could describe it as an action of killing a man, and that I take it is morally bad. You could describe it as an action of tyrannicide, which presumably is what the agent himself would have described it as, and that is possibly, according to quite a few moral theories, something good. You could describe it as an action of starting a world war, and that clearly is something very bad. Or you could describe it as an action of starting the process by which the European empires disintegrated and European states became self-determining, and that possibly might be something good. So everything depends on how you describe the action and how many consequences you bring into it. The idea of intrinsicism applied to actions does not really get started, not because consequentialism is true, but because you cannot make a clear distinction, only an ambiguous one, between an action and its consequences.

The second sort of thing that might be intrinsically good is perhaps the most plausible of the three that I reject: that which we get in Aristotle, the idea that it is virtues and certain human qualities of character that are intrinsically valuable, while vices are intrinsically bad. One problem with this is that virtues and vices are precisely one of the things about which different judgements are made in dif-

ferent moral codes; but this is not conclusive, for as already noted there are different accounts which can be given of that. What I suggest is that most virtues, or in particular most of those virtues which we characterise as moral virtues rather than various other kinds of virtues which there may be, are quite clearly capacities to produce effects of a certain kind and are valued in accordance with the effects that they produce. This is almost exactly parallel to what I said about acts; the point is not that virtues are good because of their consequences, but that you cannot even define a particular virtue without saying what sort of thing its consequences are.

Experiences

The third category of entities which could be seen as good in themselves are human experiences; this is a very popular one and one which utilitarians hold. For utilitarians, experiences of pleasure are intrinsically good and experiences of pain are intrinsically bad, and that is the end of the matter. This depends on a mistaken account of what pleasure is; pleasure is not just a pleasant sensation, pleasure is always pleasure *in* something, pleasure in music, food, a walk, companionship, or whatever. These pleasures are qualitatively different. If someone wants the pleasure of a walk it is no use telling them that a good meal would give them even more pleasure. That is not the pleasure that the person wants. Pleasures are tied to what they are pleasures *in*, just as actions are tied to what effects they produce. Hence, it surely must be the things which you take pleasure in which are the valuable thing, rather than the pleasure itself. This is perhaps confirmed by the fact that quite clearly, or highly plausibly (a strict utilitarian may want to deny this), some pleasures are intrinsically bad, for instance the pleasure taken in the death or severe pain of another person. Someone could say that the pleasure in itself is good but the effect of it, namely killing somebody or hurting somebody, is bad, and outweighs that; but that seems to me to be untrue. In a particular circumstance, for instance in a just, revolutionary war, it might be the right thing to do to kill somebody, but it will always be the wrong thing to do to take pleasure in killing somebody. In two cases of killing somebody, one in which pleasure is taken and the other in which it is not, from a utilitarian point of view, the one in which pleasure is taken comes out better because pleasure is intrinsically good; but it seems to me that this is quite clearly wrong, killing somebody even when it is right ought not to be done with pleasure.

Beings

One might think of other experiences apart from pleasure which are supposed to be intrinsically good, but I pass over them for lack of time, and come to the final candidate, the one I want to defend, which is that what is intrinsically good is quite simply beings. We have Kant's view (the other thing Kant got right) that human beings are ends in themselves. What I think he meant by that, or ought to have meant, is that human beings are in some measure worthy of our love and we ought to act towards

them, other things being equal, in ways which express this. What Kant got wrong I think is that he thought that *only* human beings were, and though I think that human beings take precedence over animals, plants or minerals in this respect, I do think that other things also have some sort of claim on our love, that all things have some sort of intrinsic value. I argue this in my book. That is the fourth alternative, that it is not acts, virtues or experiences, but actually beings which are what is good in themselves.

So my conclusion is that underlying values are beings which are fit to be loved in various degrees and in various

manners determined by their own intrinsic nature, and that particular moral codes can be more or less right about what these values are and how to love them, or they can be different in ways determined by different environments, or they can be different in ways which are equally good between which there is no moral judgement. These are all different possibilities about the ways in which moral communities can differ about a common set of things which are intrinsically valuable.

Notes

1. London & New York, Routledge 1999.



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