

Are There Moral Truths?

Quote of the Day:

“All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them.”

-- Galileo

Course evaluations:

<https://uw.iasystem.org/survey/233006>

Paper assignment, tomorrow's sections

Today's class will have a heavy Smith stamp on it, drawing from a book I'm in the process of publishing.

- I offer these claims as items for consideration, not as so obviously true that they are beyond dispute.**
- I welcome your comments, questions, and critiques.**

How many of you agree with the following statement?

- **Morality is subjective, a matter of opinion, which means there is no universal morality.**

That statement is a version of moral relativism: “the truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons”

I will try to persuade those of you who think you are moral relativists that you're actually not.

Some potential reasons why someone (usually on the left) might embrace moral relativism:

- Moral relativism allows someone to hold a self-image as an open-minded and tolerant person.**
- Advocating moral relativism increases the chances of obtaining liberal policies on prominent moral issues of the last few decades such as abortion and matters of sexual orientation and gender identity.**

But what if we switch the issues at stake to:

- **racial discrimination**
- **domestic abuse**

Furthermore, if morality was just a matter of opinion, you could not condemn someone for holding the wrong beliefs. In my experience, however, no one is nonchalant when talking about matters they consider immoral.

Smith: no one is really a moral relativist, at least within their own society. Everybody believes that certain individuals or groups within their society have the right morality, whereas others have the wrong morality, and that this is not just a matter of opinion.

So what's the alternative to moral relativism?

Moral realism is the meta-ethical view that moral facts and values exist, and that they are objective and independent of our perception of them.

Five broad approaches to the sources and grounding of morality, under the broad umbrella of moral realism:



- 1. Divine command approaches: Morality stems from the commands of a perfect God.**
- 2. Social contract approaches: Morality is established through the hypothetical or actual agreement of human beings.**
- 3. Consequentialist/utilitarian approaches: The morality of actions must be judged according to their consequences.**

4. Deontological/Kantian approaches: Some things are inherently right or wrong, regardless of circumstances, and we can identify the correct moral rules and duties.

5. Virtue ethics: To obtain ethical actions, we must cultivate a person's character such that they want to do the right thing.

The rest of today's class is based on my book, where I focus only on 1 and 2.

In order for divine command morality to work, a personal and interventionist God must exist, and we need to know what he has communicated.

- **Personal revelation has obvious problems because it's unverifiable.**

- **Written revelation, stemming from the personal revelation of accepted prophets or apostles, has the advantage of being open and public. The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) all rely in part on written revelation.**



- **The problem: both the Bible and Quran contain moral principles that virtually no one in the 21st century can accept. One such example is slavery.**

Bible

You shall make slaves of the foreigners around you (Lev. 25:44-46)

You can enslave war captives (Deut. 20:10-13; Num. 31:1-47)

Slaves obey your masters, consider them worthy of all honor (Eph. 6:5-9, Col. 3:22-24, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Tim. 6:1)

Quran

Three categories of human beings: freeman, female, and slave (2:178)

You can enslave or sell war captives (47:4)

A male slaveowner has sexual access to his female slaves (4:24)

**Beyond the Quran:
Muhammad owned slaves**

How can a 21st century Christian or Muslim both (a) accept their book as God's revelation, and (b) handle the parts most people today consider immoral?

- Ignore: avoid the matter entirely or shift attention to someplace else in the text**
- Rationalize: make excuses for what the text says about God and his commands**
- Reinterpret: develop a new interpretation differing from a plain reading of the text, or from the interpretations believers accepted before recent centuries**
- Mystify: say that God moves in mysterious ways and we cannot fully understand his revelation**

Smith: the holy books of the Abrahamic religions are too flawed to be considered revelation. Regardless of whether or not there is a God, we must discover morality for ourselves.

My alternative, rooted in the social contract tradition, could be embraced by atheists, members of non-scriptural religions, and non-traditional Christians, Jews, and Muslims who see their holy books not as the Word of God but as the word of certain human beings seeking God.

Two relevant definitions of what it means to be objective:

“of a person and his or her judgement: not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts; impartial; detached”

“external to or independent of the mind”

Philosophers disagree about whether the second definition is meaningful in a world without God. I focus instead on the first definition.

The starting point: I'm biased, you're biased, we're all biased, due to the many factors shaping our moral beliefs (genes, brain biochemistry, upbringing, peers, media, society, culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.)

So can we obtain objectivity? As individuals, we can aspire to it but none of us will ever get there. As a community, however, we can obtain something that looks like objectivity if we reach agreement despite our individual biases.

Smith's definition of morality: "the consensus among individuals and societies regarding right and wrong conduct that would emerge or has emerged after a process of inclusive deliberation"

Key components of the definition:

"deliberation": open dialogue and discussion based on rationality and reason; use critical thinking, develop empathy, engage other people's arguments, and change your mind when presented with a persuasive case

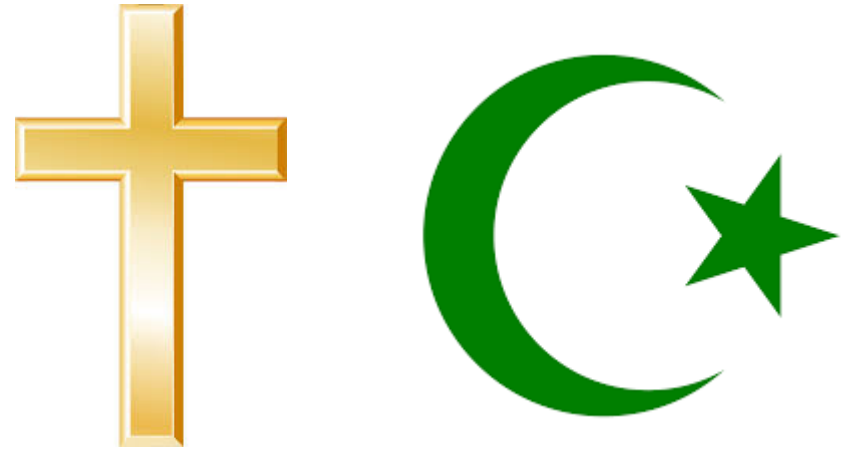
"inclusive": all kinds of people participate in the deliberation, across lines of race, gender, class, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, etc.

“consensus”: an overwhelming majority but not necessarily unanimity. No person, group, or society gets an automatic veto.

“among individuals and societies”: I’m imagining an ongoing and never-ending conversation around the world and over time, ideally including all of humanity.

“would emerge or has emerged”: I’m moving back and forth between the ideal and the actual.

Inclusive deliberation is the means of obtaining objectivity, conceived as a community property rather than an individual property.



**Let's take an example where we can compare my social contract approach to a divine command approach.
Morality on questions related to gender works well for this purpose.**

Bible

Rape is an offense against a girl/woman's father. Offender pays a fine and marries her (Deut. 22:28-29)

Wives obey your husbands (Col. 3:18, Eph. 5:22, 1 Peter 3:1)

Almost all leaders in the Bible, and all disciples, are men

Paul forbids women from having authority over men in church, and from speaking (1 Cor. 14:34-35, 1 Tim. 2:11-15)

Childbirth pain for women to punish Eve's sin (Gen 3:16)

Quran

Men have responsibility/authority over women (2:228)

Menstruating women are impure (2:222)

Your women are a tilth, go into them (2:223)

Up to four wives (4:3)

Child marriage (with sex) for girls (65:4, 33:49)

Sexual access to female slaves (4:24)

Wife beating for disobedience (4:34)

You might be surprised to learn that there are Christian feminists and Islamic feminists. Smith: They use the Ignore, Rationalize, Reinterpret, and Mystify strategies to make their scriptures say what they want them to say.

My alternative: The Bible and Quran did not result from deliberation, let alone inclusive deliberation. With no women authors, the result is a moral code biased against women.