

MORAL PLURALISM WITHOUT MORAL RELATIVISM

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When we deny the truth of someone else's moral beliefs and give our grounds for so doing, we make or imply judgments about the inadequacy of their reasons for belief and about the causes of their belief. And we presuppose a difference between them and us in both respects. In so doing we provide matter for a shared philosophical inquiry about the relevant types of reason and cause. It is a mark of rational disagreement on matters of serious moral import that we who so disagree should be prepared to engage in this inquiry and to recognize its standards as binding on us unqualifiedly. This recognition commits us to a denial of moral relativism. Some of these best examples of rational disagreement are found in some, although only some, of the exchanges between medieval Islamic, Jewish and Christian philosophers.

Two of the challenges presented by this World Congress are: first, to show how far rational dialogue between deeply incompatible and conflicting points of view is possible; and, secondly, to achieve this in not much more than three thousand words. This is a necessarily compressed and inadequate attempt to do both. So where to begin?

Each of us has to begin where we find ourselves, typically sharing some particular moral culture that our own society has inherited. That moral culture provides rules that structure our relationships. It presents us with conceptions of goods to be achieved and of virtues to be cultivated. And it is the necessary starting-point for critical reflections on how we ought to live. One stimulus to reflection is the discovery that there are

other different and rival moral cultures whose practice is informed by conceptions of rules, goods and virtues that differ significantly from our own, that sometimes indeed are such that, if their view of things is in the right, then in important respects ours is mistaken. Consider some examples that support this conclusion.

In the presently hegemonic moral culture of the United States concepts of individual rights and of the maximization of the satisfaction of individual preferences are central to public discourse. But the standards articulated by means of those concepts are alien and unacceptable to many cultures. Correspondingly, secularized post-Enlightenment moral cultures are generally dismissive both of appeals to custom and tradition and of moralities in which some notion of divine law has a central place. And even over concepts that are important in all or almost all moral cultures conflict occurs. Notoriously there are different and irreconcilable conceptions of distributive justice, a justice that makes desert its standard, a justice that allocates in accordance with entitlements, a justice that requires equal distributions. Honor by contrast is an important concept in some moral cultures, but not in others. And catalogues of the virtues also vary, so that, for example, Confucian catalogues of the virtues include items—notably the virtue of ritual propriety—which other catalogues exclude or ignore.

To attend to this range of differences—and it is astonishing how much of Western moral philosophy, unlike anthropology or sociology, has refused to take other than passing notice of them—is to become aware of two possible responses. One is to be resolutely dismissive of everything that is incompatible with the standpoint of one's own moral culture. The standards internal to that culture become the standards by which other cultures too are to be judged. So most ancient Greeks were dismissive of non-Greeks as barbarians, just as most Chinese of the Ming and Manchu were similarly dismissive of Europeans. So nineteenth and early twentieth century Europeans drew a line between the civilized and the savage designed to confirm them in their belief in their own moral superiority.

What this type of stance precludes is the possibility of learning anything of substance from rival and incompatible moral cultures. But so equally does another at first sight very different stance, that of a certain kind of relativism. This kind of relativist begins by noting correctly that all the attempts of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers to identify a universal and neutral standard, one compelling to all rational agents whatever their culture, by appeal to which the competing claims of rival standpoints could be rationally adjudicated, have failed. The relativist then further notes that each particular moral standpoint has its own standards of justification and its own modes of justification internal to it. From these two starting-points the relativist concludes that from the standpoint of each

particular moral culture its adherents have good reason to believe that they are in the right in their disputes with the adherents of other rival moral cultures and that there is no external rationally justifiable standard by appeal to which they could be shown to be mistaken. But it follows, just as it did for those who dismissed others as barbarians or savages, that one moral culture cannot learn from another. Should we accept this disquieting conclusion?

Both stances, that of those who reject out of hand rival types of moral belief and practice and that of the relativist, leave out of account some crucial features of moral cultures and of their disagreements and conflicts. One of these is a matter of what is involved in denying what the adherents of rival moral cultures assert. Every major moral standpoint, both in its practical judgments and in its justificatory arguments, presupposes—how far this presupposition is made explicit varies from culture to culture—some distinctive account of human nature and activity and of how human nature and activity are such that morality is whatever the adherents of that particular standpoint hold that it is. So the claim to authority advanced in respect of particular local moral cultures is never merely local. It is never merely the claim that this is how we Athenians democrats or we Japanese Confucians or we Shi'ite Iranians happen to live; it is always the claim, implicit or explicit, carefully qualified or quite unqualified, that ours is the best way for human beings to live. And a crucial ground for this claim is the further claim that our account of human nature and activity is by and large true, from which it follows that, insofar as rival views are grounded in an incompatible account of human nature and activity, those views fail, because *their* account of human nature is false.

To say of our view of human nature and activity that it is true and that rival and incompatible views advanced by others are false is of course to say more than that *their* views are inconsistent with *our* view, that they fail by our standards of truth and of rational justification. For that is something uncontroversial, something to which all parties to the disagreements could agree without difficulty. The further controversial claim is that what is judged true by our standards is unqualifiedly true. And this claim is crucial in two ways.

First, and less importantly, it reveals the incompatibility of any coherent relativism with the beliefs and practices of all the major moral cultures and in so doing it suggests that relativism, although it does not entail moral scepticism, does entail a rejection of the standpoints of all those cultures. For the only judgment taken by moral relativism to be unqualifiedly true is the judgment that no judgment advanced from the standpoints of those cultures is unqualifiedly true.

Secondly, it reveals the extent of the philosophical commitments presupposed by, although often not always accorded explicit recognition by, the adherents of those cultures. For in judging that their own basic affirmations are true and their own justificatory arguments sound, they are also committed to judging that those arguments, by appeal to which the adherents of other rival standpoints purport to show that some of their affirmations are false and some of their arguments unsound, fail. And these are of course philosophical and not only moral claims. So philosophy itself comes on the scene in the form of an invitation to provide sufficiently good reasons for advancing these claims. Philosophy in so doing is no longer merely an external commentator upon, but becomes involved in the constitution of any dialogue between moral standpoints that is able to move beyond the bare rhetoric of assertion and counter assertion. But why should this philosophical invitation be accepted? Why should the adherents of this or that particular moral standpoint choose to move beyond this rhetoric by acknowledging the need to provide reasons for their rejection of incompatible judgments made from rival standpoints?

A necessary first step is a recognition by such adherents that importance for others attaches to their own moral judgments, only if and insofar as their presupposed account of human nature and activity is *true* and that, when they present their own judgments to others as deserving assent by those others, this can only be on the basis of their claim that the account of human nature and activity presupposed by those judgments is true and that all rival and incompatible accounts are false. What are they claiming in claiming this? They are asserting that their understanding both of themselves and of others is not subject to distortion and misrepresentation in the way that the understanding that others have is. They thereby invite those others to radical self-criticism, so that they may identify the difference between how things in fact are and how they have hitherto taken them to be. But this invitation presupposes that truth is a good, independently of one's own particular moral standpoint, not a good the acknowledgment of which can be independent of all or any standpoints, but a good that is already implicitly acknowledged within the moral practice of any standpoint which in virtue of its claim to truth claims the allegiance of rational individuals.

To fail to make explicit this recognition of truth as a good is to deprive claims made on behalf of one's moral standpoint of the only authority that can successfully legitimate them. But no one's recognition of truth as a good is adequate, until and unless they have evaluated the strongest arguments that have so far been advanced for conclusions incompatible with their own, that is, until they too have undertaken the tasks of radical self-criticism to which they have invited others. To assert of some

judgment that it is true is to assert more than that it is able to withstand all attempts at refutation from any standpoint whatsoever. But to assert of any judgment that it is true commits those who assert it to holding that it is so able. And it is a necessary condition of any judgment's being so able that it has in fact been able to withstand the strongest attempts to refute it so far.

It follows that to claim truth for one's own judgments requires that one should deliberately and systematically expose those judgments to every significant possibility of refutation. Where fundamental disagreement between rival moral points of view is concerned, this involves an act of the philosophical imagination, an imagined shift in one's vantage-point, so that one understands how one's own positions appear from the point of view of the other at every level from that of particular episodes of practical judgment and reasoning to that at which basic theoretical claims about practice are made. For without such understanding it will be impossible to appreciate fully the force of those arguments which from the point of view of the other constitute a sufficient refutation of one's own claims. How is such an imaginative understanding to be achieved?

It involves treating the other as a partner in one's own enquiries, as one from whom much has to be learned, and this type of learning ideally requires that one learn to inhabit the other's culture, to share, so far as possible, in the other's practice and so to reason as the other reasons. Much depends here on how hospitable the other is to such enquiry and that in turn depends in part on how far and how effectively the other is invited to participate in the enquiry. What matters most is an acknowledgment that to embark on this type of enquiry requires that one accord authority to the ethics of enquiry and that one therefore find some way of simultaneously giving allegiance both to one's own moral standpoint and to the ethics of enquiry. What do I mean by the ethics of enquiry?

Enquiry has as its goal the achievement of truth through a dialectical development of critical objections to our initial shared beliefs, the discovery of how those beliefs must in consequence be abandoned or revised, and the subsequent development of further objections to our newly revised beliefs until we reach a point at which we have an adequate answer to the strongest objections that anyone has been able to advance from whatever point of view. The beliefs from which we start cannot but be our own; the objections to which we must be open may be those of anyone whatsoever. And this entails that we extend to anyone who is an actual or potential participant in that activity of enquiry the kind of consideration necessary for such participation. What is necessary is that such a one should be free to speak her or his mind in developing whatever arguments are relevant. This freedom is possible only when each participant knows that the others will abide by certain rules and exhibit certain virtues.

Those rules must provide security from any threat of bodily or other harm to oneself or to family and friends or to legitimate property. They must warrant the expectation that one will be addressed truthfully and undevously and trusted to speak truthfully and undevously. They must provide for justice in conversation, for each contributor to be able to speak in turn and at appropriate length. And they must be directed to the end of enabling and requiring participants to attend to the substance of the arguments and not to who utters them. These rules will have point and purpose to anyone committed to the goods of enquiry. Conformity to them will be part, although only part of what is required by the virtues of enquiry, those qualities of mind and character that are necessary for achieving the good of truth. This set of rules and virtues is not unfamiliar. Versions of them are already ascribed authority in a number of moral cultures. But, if we understand them as constituting the ethics of enquiry, we accord them an additional authority that is independent of moral standpoint, an authority that derives from the fact that without conformity to them we cannot achieve the common good of truth through our enquiries.

Here then is the beginning of an answer to the relativist. For it is not just that the adherents of each particular moral standpoint, if they are to give good reason for taking seriously their claims that the beliefs presupposed by their particular standpoint are true, must recognize truth as a good, whatever one's standpoint, but that the relativists, if they are to give good reason for taking the claim that relativism is true seriously, must also recognize truth as a good, whatever one's standpoint, and to the extent that they do so they abandon relativism. And since the recognition of truth as a good involves according authority to the virtues and rules that constitute the ethics of enquiry, those virtues and rules too escape the relativistic critique. But this is not the only way in which the ethics of enquiry undermines relativism.

I have so far not questioned the relativist's portrayal of the standpoint of different moral cultures as each having its own standards in such a way that there is no common and neutral standard by appeal to which their rival claims may be adjudicated. But now we do need to put it in question. For when the adherents of some particular moral standpoint find that their claims concerning the truth of their own beliefs have committed them to finding a place for the goods, virtues and rules of an ethics of enquiry within their moral scheme, as they have hitherto understood it, the question is inescapably posed: how well or how badly can that particular set of beliefs and practices accommodate what an ethics of enquiry requires it to accommodate? For it is always possible and often the case that there will be at various points tensions and incoherences between the conceptions of goods, virtues and rules that have hitherto informed the practice of this

or that particular moral culture and the conceptions of goods, virtues and rules that inform the ethics of enquiry. So problems arise about how to resolve them. Moreover the progress of enquiry may have revealed tensions and incoherences that were already present, but hitherto unnoticed or treated as of no account, within the moral scheme of that particular culture. For either or both reasons that particular moral culture may be unable to avoid becoming to some significant degree an argumentative culture of questions and problems as well as of judgments and affirmations.

It is when a moral culture becomes to some significant degree self-questioning in this way that those who inhabit it may become able to put their own most fundamental standards and principles to the test and in so doing discover what resources are available to them to resolve the problems that are thereby posed. In so doing they will also and incidentally have acquired a new set of standards for evaluating not only their own theory and practice, but also the theory and practice of other rival standpoints. For we are able to compare the relative success or failure of the adherents of each different standpoint in their attempts to resolve through practical and theoretical enquiry the problems internal to their own standpoint and the resources which each possesses for explaining such success and failure. And so the possibility opens up that we may discover not just that our own enquiries in morals and politics have become frustrated and sterile, but that there is some other standpoint from which it can be explained why this failure, given our overall perspective, was inescapable. That is, the possibility has opened up that we may find grounds for judging some other standpoint superior to our own. We are no longer imprisoned within our own standpoint.

It may seem to be, but it is not paradoxical, to conclude that the discovery that it is possible for our own particular moral standpoint to be rationally defeated by some rival standpoint is a necessary condition for arriving at a rational vindication of our own point of view. For the strongest vindication that any point of view can receive is that it has so far survived encounters with as wide as possible a variety of other and rival standpoints without suffering such defeat, although it will of course have generally emerged from such encounters modified and revised in various ways.

Rational moral enquiry then is always conducted from within some one particular moral standpoint. But insofar as that standpoint has integrated into itself the ethics of enquiry, an ethics that has itself appeared in a number of cultural guises—Jewish, Greek, Confucian, Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian among others—its adherents will become able to enter into a constructive dialogue with the adherents of some other point of view, having discovered that there are standards that they share with those who also engage in enquiry, whatever their point of view. And

with this discovery the threat that relativism presented, that we could not learn from each other through such dialogue, is dissipated. We can recognize and give respect to a variety of points of view, so remaining moral pluralists, without becoming moral relativists.

So I conclude; but am I in fact entitled to this conclusion? It is important to note that in at least three respects my argument is incomplete. First, I have relied upon, but never spelled out, a particular understanding of the nature of truth, one that is very much at odds with some currently influential theories of truth. Secondly, my account of what I have called the ethics of enquiry is far too brief to be adequate. And thirdly, I have not considered what reply to my argument an insightful relativist might make. So that what I have presented is perhaps a gesture towards an argument, rather than argument, not a conclusion to which I am as yet entitled, but a conclusion to which I might become entitled. But that at least is a beginning.

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