The Basis of Secular Morality (1)

Can Secular Morality accept Moral Relativism?

The section entitled "What is Morality?" on the Secular Morality website deliberately skirts around the question of from what basis morality can develop when there is no existing consensus about objectives and values, since this raises a contentious issue which cannot be quickly dealt with.

To summarise, religious leaders often claim that in the absence of divine authority the only alternative is "Moral Relativism". While many non-believers are inclined to say that there is nothing much wrong with that, others say that there certainly is. Here I argue against the former viewpoint and advocate the latter view, suggesting that a humanist approach offers another alternative.

Where we agree

Many of us from either side of this debate can agree about the reasons why it is useful to try to be clearer about the place of morality in a secular view of the world. Notably, surveys have shown that one of the main obstacles to the abandonment of religious superstitions is the widespread belief that without religion there can be no morality.

We can agree that this belief is an utter fallacy – we can point out the generally moral pattern of public behaviour in some of the least religious countries in the world such as the Scandinavian countries, and the extent of hypocrisy unearthed in highly religious groups such as Catholic priests or Evangelical preachers.

We can object to those who take Hitler as an example of atheism, that in fact the evil of Nazism, far from arising from *amorality*, flowed directly from a strong code of warped "values", such as national destiny and racial purity, based on superstitions as powerful as religious superstitions.

We can also agree that the idea of "absolute right and wrong" with no shades of grey is a chimera. Even the Catholic Church lists exceptions to the moral law that Thou Shall not Kill, including the exception of "Just Wars". How many more shades of grey can there be than in the identification in practice of a Just War?

However, none of these arguments will convince those fearful of stepping off the religious boat, unless they can see some other basis to float moral values on. The Secular Morality Project seeks to identify such a basis pragmatically, by seeing morality as a "social construct", something that has evolved and continues to evolve through shared experience and dialogue. I agree on the usefulness of such an approach. Where I have disagreed with some other humanists, at least in the terms we prefer to use, is whether such an approach is consistent with what philosophers call "Moral Relativism", or whether it can be and should be supplemented by an examination of the "*Universal*" foundations of morality.

(Note the two senses of "relative" – meaning a matter of degree, as the opposite of absolute, and a matter of context, as the opposite of universal. It is the second sense that is at issue here.)

Moral Relativism

There is a strong tradition of critical thought in the twentieth century that denies the possibility of any universal element of morality. An example of this tradition is the assertion by the American Association of Anthropologists, in opposition to the concept of "universal human rights", post Auschwitz, that "there is no way of showing that the values of one culture are better than those of another". Wikipedia more generally defines "meta-ethical relativism" as the view that "terms such as "good", "bad", "right" and "wrong" ... are relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of an individual or a group of people". A J Ayer emphasized the role of individual subjectivity in claiming that moral judgements are no different from other vehicles for venting emotions – so to declare that tax cheating is wrong carries no more meaning than the declaration "Boo to tax cheating". In short, "values are just tastes or distastes gilded with honorifics". On the other hand, the "postmodernist" movement of cultural criticism emphasizes the collective form of relativism, claiming that all truths (including ethical truths) are self-sustaining cultural constructs, with no possibility of a universal standpoint.

As I understand this school of "Moral Relativism", it simply rules out any possibility of choosing between one moral code and another, and hence any criterion for deciding what "Secular Morality" should be. To choose one version against all its rivals requires some criterion which *lies outside them all.* In the absence of any such universal criterion, one is simply asserting the values of the culture one belongs to. "We" say that FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) is wrong by the values of our culture. "Others" say that it is essential in their culture. Moral Relativism cannot help but give equal status to both assertions.

Objections to Moral Relativism

Much of the reason for the popularity of Moral Relativism is the influence of anthropological and historical accounts of how greatly moral rules vary from culture to culture. However, such accounts merely prove that the universal foundations of morality do not take the form of right and wrong "classes of action", not that there are no foundations of any other form. After all, languages also vary greatly from culture to culture, but that does not preclude some degree of communication. The relativism of vocabulary and syntax does not prove the impossibility of universal meanings. Cultures can agree on the immorality of "indecency" as defined by the intent of the action objected to, even though the proscribed actions themselves, like languages, may be entirely arbitrary and greatly variable.

As Sam Harris has argued [1], the lack of universal acceptance of many of the findings of science is not a rational ground for regarding such findings to be just a matter of opinion, and the same applies in principle to morality.

Even those who take multicultural relativism to the extent of saying "we have no right" to criticise practices like FGM that belong to other cultures are assuming a universal overriding value of tolerance or impartiality. But once one has accepted one such universal value, the claim that universal values are impossible can no longer be sustained. A supposedly neutral position on such a practice, the legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin argued [2], is actually equivalent to saying it is acceptable. One can only choose to prohibit it or not to.

Secular Morality and Frontier Ethics

It is easy to be sceptical about any attempt to identify the universal element of ethics. Rather than waiting for ever for philosophers to agree on what universal values might be (or even mean), one might be tempted to say, why don't we just consider "what works"? But questions about the most effective means can only make sense if the ends are commonly agreed. This can be a valuable approach if dealing with day-to-day moral dilemmas within a shared culture – which is mostly what the Secular Morality Project and its Ethical Juries has been about. But it is of no help when dealing with the questions of "frontier ethics", such as the problems of multiculturalism, of our moral duties to non-human species, of moral constraints on unprecedented technologies. All such questions require us to *stand outside* established moral codes, and decide *towards what end* a new code should "work". So where can such a culturally independent standpoint be? And how can culturally "relative" codes arise from any "universal" standpoint?

Are moral values objective?

A reputable school of secular thought holds that moral values are "objective": "out there" like numbers or physical laws, somehow intrinsic to situations and not to beliefs – as it is sometimes expressed, "moral truths are true whether anybody believes them or not". I think this school is asking the wrong question. We should ask: could *anything* be morally right or wrong in a universe with no conscious beings? Is a faulty thermometer dishonest, or a forest fire morally greedy? Surely not – and so it follows, as far as I can see, that morality is a function of consciousness, arising from *what is common to subjective experience.* But if that is the case, then it has major implications. If consciousness is a precondition for morality then the nature of consciousness must in some way determine the nature of morality. That is where the universal element should be sought – one could say, in psychology rather than in anthropology. Students of philosophy might like to call this view "universal moral subjectivism", but the label "humanism" comes close as well. In this view, whether a moral claim is true doesn't depend on whether anybody actually *does* believe it, but it does depend on whether they *would* believe it under some ideal conditions of omniscience in which all interpersonal differences are dissolved. For an individual, this appears to be "out there", but for mankind collectively it is "in here".

Objections to Humanist Morality

Any suggestion that morality derives in some sense from "Human Nature" runs into some obvious objections. Firstly, there is the claim that "there is no such thing as Human Nature". This can only be a rhetorical exaggeration, since taken literally it implies that nothing fundamentally distinguishes a human from a tiger or a tailor's dummy. It is certainly true that many characteristics once thought to belong to "Human Nature" are now attributed to "nurture", but it remains the case that a given regime of nurture applied to a human has a very different effect to the same regime applied to a tiger or a tailor's dummy, and that difference is due to the different natures of the recipients concerned - so such discoveries merely shift our understanding of Human Nature, they don't eliminate it.

A second possible objection is that it reflects the same anthropocentric bias as those religions that "make God in Man's image". I believe there are two strong counter-arguments to such a criticism. Firstly, it depends on how Human Nature is conceived. Provided that it is conceived in the light of our best scientific understanding, with all our ecological, evolutionary and genetic links with the remainder of Nature taken into account, then there is no bias. Secondly, there is a sense in which we cannot help but be anthropocentric: the only eyes through which we can look at the world are our

own. We will never know "what it feels like to be a bat" in the way that we know what it feels like to be ourselves, although with advances in neuroscience we can make increasingly well-founded partial guesses. Thus when I refer to "Humanism" as a basis for morality, I am assuming that the same basis can apply (or not) to other species or to machines precisely to the extent that we are able (or not) to conceive of them as sharing our subjective experience.

There is a third objection, which I do agree has more force. The nature of human consciousness even at the most basic level is itself the product of evolution, and as such cannot be regarded as fixed. I have ignored this on the grounds that the rate of change until now has been slow in relation to the human life span. (If neuroscience does lead to such novelties as the routine splitting, cloning or merging of minds, we can be confident that consciousness will come to seem something very different, and the implications for morality are probably impossible to anticipate. But this is an ethical frontier too far for the present discussion!) Thus I should make it clear that when I say "universal" I am referring strictly to the universe of human experience at the current stage of evolution.

Universal foundations and Relative rules

As an illustration of how "Universal" and "Relative" (i.e. culturally specific) elements can combine in a moral outlook, consider the case of the "Golden Rule", for example "treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself". To avoid a common objection to this rule, it can be assumed that the person saying it wishes to be treated as an individual, with individual differences taken into account – and so, according to the Rule, should take individual differences into account, in so far as they are known, when deciding how to treat others. With this proviso, the idea behind the Golden Rule is so widespread as to be indeed a promising candidate for inclusion in any account of the Universal elements of morality. Indeed, I intend to argue in the planned Part 2 of this discussion that it is indeed a natural consequence of the nature of conscious experience, and so meets the requirements of universality. However, it is often forgotten that it begs a huge question: who are these "Others"? Does it just apply to other members of the same hunting group? Or the same family, or clan, or caste, or class, or nation, or species – or indeed to any fellow creature or life-form? Each different answer to this question corresponds to a different culturally specific moral code – and yet the basic moral motivation is shared by all the cultures.

The differences between these different manifestations of the same universal value can be described as different "constructs" or "interpretations" of the concept of the "other"; and it is in such differences of interpretation that one see the role of factual knowledge. These others to whom we feel a moral obligation are just those with whom we can mentally identify. As societies' empirical knowledge of the world changes – both the knowledge of individuals and the knowledge of respected sources of intellectual authority – the ability to identify with others changes. Hence the answer to a specific question, such as what are our moral obligations to primates, is not to be found in some cunning verbal formula but in a procedure: continue to learn more about the similarities and differences and other relationships between primates and ourselves, and the best moral interpretation will slowly evolve.

So we can see the typical pattern by which a culture-specific moral rule develops. A universal value arises from the nature of consciousness. Factual understanding within a given culture leads to an interpretation of the general concepts addressed by the value. The combination of the universal value and the specific interpretation implies a particular code of behaviour.

Elsewhere [3], I have argued that changing an individual's moral choice depends on a change in the "constructed self" to which they feel an obligation to be true. In the same way, a change in the shared moral code of a culture depends on a change in the collective interpretation of everything about the context in which members of the culture act. At least this explanation accounts for the difficulty in arriving at a universal morality at the level of detailed codes of behaviour.

Conclusion

It may have been noticed that the differences between my account of the basis of moral codes and the alternative view, which denies any universal ingredients, are very small for many practical purposes. The alternative view emphasises the evolutionary character of morality and thus resists the idea of a universal element in any sense of being unchanging. I speak of a universal basis only insofar as human consciousness at this stage in evolution has universal elements, and stress its challenging, shadowy, generalised nature. However, to repeat, there are two very good reasons why I insist on my version. Firstly it provides a clear pointer to the focus of attention necessary to enable advances at what I have called ethical frontiers. And secondly, it makes it quite clear why the acknowledgement of cultural pluralism doesn't mean that "anything goes".

In the planned part 2 of this contribution I hope to show how, as far as my own thinking goes, those shadowy universal moral values do arise from the nature of universal consciousness.

References:

[1] Sam Harris, "The Moral Landscape"

[2] Ronald Dworkin, "Justice for Hedgehogs"

 [3] Roger Haines, "Report on Honesty & Integrity Seminar"