

Moral Thinking: An Introduction To Values And Ethics

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Moral Relativism

Hello everyone, today we are going to look at two obstructions to moral thinking, moral relativism and egoism. Now as you proceed, or as you begin the journey, in moral thinking, moral philosophy, there are two obstructions that you are bound to face, or many of us do face. And this is, Moral Relativism and Egoism. And let me briefly tell you, what these two basically mean like. So, when you say that well, to each his own, you are actually being a moral relativist. And this especially concerns, moral philosophy and moral thinking, because a very compelling argument that especially youngsters face, or most of us face, but especially it is compelling in the case of youngsters, is when we look at moral relativism, claiming that well, values are all relative, and to each his own.

So there is no way, we can talk about values, or we can debate about values. So everyone has their own values, and therefore there is no point, or there is no scope for arriving at any value, that can be argued for or discussed and debated. So if you have succumbed to, or you have encountered such tendencies, then that is what is a moral relativist. And if one is a moral relativist, then there is no possibility of moral knowledge.

So something like, moral knowledge, that is a, is that even possible. Now if, let me use this portion. Yes, okay. So, is moral knowledge at all possible, for to proceed on the journey of moral knowledge. And we are not talking about moral opinions, or moral views, but moral knowledge.

Knowledge meaning, that is something that can be argued for, that is something that has a compelling rational force within it. So if one succumbs to the notion of moral relativism, one is probably not prepared to go ahead and discuss about moral notions, or moral thinking. That's the first obstruction that we face, when we on the journey to moral relativism, or first or the most dominant obstruction. And the second one is what philosophers called Egoism, and which simply means that, I do what I wish to do, and

that is how things are, and that is how things ought to be. So there is no scope for discussion.

So I do what I want to do, and that's a common pop phrase that we come across, that do what you want to do, listen to your heart, do what you wish for, or finally I do what I want to do. So if this is an approach that one holds, then one is also not on a journey of moral theorization, because in this sense, we are all doing what we want to do, or what we wish to do. The catchphrase here is, what does one want to do? Is that something which is coming out of nowhere, or is that a scope of deliberation. So there is this excellent chapter on Ethics, and as you can see on the screen, it talks about the fundamental, in the John Shands book called Fundamentals of Philosophy, there is a chapter called Ethics written by Pierce Ben. So this is a chapter from which these two arguments have been sourced, and of course I have added some of it from my own teachings in class.

So this is a chapter that can help you visit, and understand these two obstructions more carefully. So let's begin. Now, when we look at Moral Relativism, when we look at the world around us, we find values, and practices, and rituals, and conventions, all of them are so different, right. What is known as Cultural Relativism. Say in one culture, we find that we are looking at certain practices as valid, and in another culture, we are looking at other practices as valid, or rather the contrary to those practices as valid.

So when we look at practices that are contrary, and simultaneously followed in different parts of the world, or in different cultures, we tend to think that well, there is nothing intrinsically right, or wrong about this practice. And each practice, or each practice is relative to the part of the world, or the part of the culture, or family, that we come across. Now this variation in practices can be across cultures, across nations, across families, across communities, across even individuals, or even across various phases of an individual's lives. If there is, if Moral Relativism holds, if from Cultural Relativism, we argue for Moral Relativism, then the whole possibility of Moral Philosophy, ceases to be. So whether this is the case or not, that is what we are going to examine.

Before that, now what I ask for is, who is a Moral Fundamentalist. A Moral Fundamentalist is one, who holds certain things as absolute, and non-negotiable, or universal. If that is the case, then because the moment we hear the name, the word Fundamentalist, we tend to connect it with Extremism, or a Terrorist, or somebody who uses extreme forms of violence. But conceptually, that is not true. Somebody who uses, or who holds to one value as supreme, is a Fundamentalist about that value.

Now a point to note here, is that, one can be a Fundamentalist about one particular

value. One doesn't have to be a Fundamentalist, one doesn't have to be a Fundamentalist about all the values, what one holds, but about at least one value, that is held as foundational, or universal. So if I say that Mahatma Gandhi was a Fundamentalist, now that would might sound alarming right at the front, right at the start. But if you think through it, well when he used non-violence as something, which is foundational, and fundamental, he can very well be regarded as a Fundamentalist. So now, this is what a Fundamentalist is.

Having this background clear, let us try to frame out, what is meant by Moral Relativism. Now if you look at Moral Relativism, it is the doctrine that, there is no one true moral system binding on all people, at all times. Now with such a definition, it seems very tempting, and the lure is that well, there is perhaps this is the way to look at it, and there is no one true moral system binding at all people, at all time. And therefore, there is no point talking about moral philosophy, and there is no point coming out to debate, or look for something called moral knowledge. So is a Transcultural perspective possible, in Moral Relativism.

No. Moral Relativism, a Transcultural perspective, is just not possible. But then, let us go ahead and look at Moral Relativism, in a little bit more detail. What does Moral Relativism, really lead us to? So till this point, maybe the arguments sounds in favour of Moral Relativism. Because there is no single frame of reference, that is true across cultures. But now, let us think of it.

If I say that well, if there is a dispute between two people, let them fight it out, and settle it. If I say that, aggression or physical violence, is a value of the perpetrator, and there is no way, we can check them morally, that physical violence is fine with them. So, it is an acceptable value. Now, let me pull up something, which is more significant, is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And in there, there is one claim, that says, and of course, all of them are Universal Declarations.

And that is a biggest testimony, in the search for a Universal Human Value. One of the declarations is, that no one can be punished, or can be given a verdict, without the chance to present their point of view. That means, the very notion of the system of Judiciary, where one has a chance to defend oneself. The classical case of, say Ajmal Kasab undergoing a trial. Now, for some of us, it may have been wastage of time and resources, and quite impatient.

But to look at it as a value, that the Indian Constitution holds, that no one can be punished, without a trial, or no one can be judged upon, without a trial, where that person gets the ability to represent, his or her own self. So, Moral Relativism, now it

starts to seem, difficulty here. And what we are going to establish over here, or trying to establish in this argument, is that what the lure of Moral Relativism, is actually not what is meant by Moral Relativism, but it is intellectual humility, and moral toleration. That seems to be, what we really value, or what significantly people value, but term it rather inaccurately as, Moral Relativism. So, let us see, what is intellectual humility.

Now, not being dogmatic, or being open to revision, or the impossibility of knowledge. So, what does the meaning of intellectual, or what is, when we unpack the phrase, intellectual humility. We mean, well, if one looks at the lure of Moral Relativism, we are saying that well, the temptation of Moral Relativism is, that we really do not know, what is the right thing to do. And therefore, we are intellectually humble, and we are not making a judgement.

Right. But, is that what, we are Relativists do. Relativists say that, there is no judgement possible, rather than there being a scope of error. So, when we unpack this word called, Intellectual Humility, we see that, it really does not mean, Moral Relativism. So, intellectual humility is not equal to, Moral Relativism. So, intellectual humility is not equal to, Moral Relativism.

Whereas, we tend to think that, intellectual humility is the same thing as, Moral Relativism. So, to be intellectually humble, is not to be dogmatic. It is to be open to revision. Or, does it mean impossibility of knowledge.

No. If you call yourself, intellectually humble, then you do not deny knowledge. But what you say, that the knowledge that I have, may be revised. Right. Now, the other crucial phrase that we come across, which is disguised as, Moral Relativism, is Moral Toleration.

Now, what is Moral Toleration. Moral Toleration, we all would like to, or many of us would like to be, known as tolerance. So, does it reject Judgementalism, factoring our own non-rational intake. Or, does it mean something else. And there is a lovely example, that the text offers, that listen to say, a racial banter of your cab driver. You are not responding to the cab driver, but you are nevertheless making a judgement of disagreement with that.

So, we are making judgement. So, what is toleration. An analysis of the concept of moral toleration, has to be understood. Does someone who tolerates a value, that one does not approve of, is one being a Relativist about it. Or is one being, making a judgement about it, but not expressing it. Let's say, this particularly comes into the case, when the threshold is low.

So, if you find somebody with a practice. And here, I will make a distinction between, moral practice and moral values, in a moment. But, when you come across moral practices, you would take a look that well, certain things that you do not approve of. Let's think of, say somebody who is, let's think of a mildly low threshold moral practice.

Let's say, stick to, Castist claims. I think something that we can connect to much more in the Indian milieu, rather than, so or regional claims. That when you find somebody in conversation, is making, Castist claims. Well, you may not approve of it, but you do not make a protest, unless until it crosses a threshold. So, you are being tolerant of others views. But to the point, that you are, it is not that you are indifferent to the proposal at hand, but you are finding the threshold not high enough to react to.

So, the point is that, the one who is practicing tolerance, is making a judgement, is making an absolute claim, but is not expressing it. How would it be, if you are a Relativist? A genuine moral Relativist, would look at any practice, without judging it at all. Because, a genuine moral Relativist, would look at a person squashing a puppy, or a group of kids trying to play football with a live puppy, as a curious, unjudging way of looking at things. So, for the tolerant, this may be the threshold crossed, and they would immediately intervene, as to why this should not be done. So, agreed that, there are a lot of moral differences.

But that, we live in the same world, is also a testament that, we have to arrive at some agreed upon values. Now, let me give you one more example, that perhaps seals the deal totally. If you look at the law books of the world, Constitutions, laws, judiciary, how are laws made? That why is killing a fellow human being, punishable? Now that is something, as a Relativist, you cannot make that claim. You would like to, a genuine Relativist, would say that well, that is right from that person's perspective. Murder is right from your perspective, and it is not right from my perspective.

So, what right do I have to impose, my views on yours. So if that is how a genuine moral Relativist would be. So, in a moral Relativist framework, there can be no laws, that well cheating is right, or cheating is wrong. That well, somebody could say that, no this is my way of looking at the world, that I can lie, cheat, for my own gain.

These are my values. And, they are different from your values. The whole possibility edifice of the laws, stands on the assumption of Moral Universalism. That there are some values, that are universal. There are differences in a lot of values.

But there are some values, that are universal. So the very fact that, we have laws, is a

proof that, Moral Universalism holds. These laws are revisable. These laws are not laws, that are eternal, that always stand with what, are not eternal, or absolute across times and places. These are open to revision. So that, laws can be open to revision, depending on societal consensus, is again a value that has been universalised.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is a value that has been universalised. So when we look at Moral Relativism, however tempting the hat of Moral Relativism is, one should know very carefully, what it implies, and what it means, before one commits oneself to a Moral Universalistic position. So to a Moral Relativistic position. So a Moral Relativist, will be the one who is unable to make any judgements, on what one comes across. So it is a strange way of looking at the world, that which most of us do not look at.

So let me stick my neck out, and say that, in popular culture, when we claim that, we are not being judgmental. Are we really not being judgmental, or are we being tolerant. Of course, there are some practices, in which one can be non-judgmental. But in many practices, or in a few practices at least, one is making a judgement, but not expressing it.

And that is not Moral Relativism. That is Moral Tolerance. What we have been understanding as, intellectual humility, or what we have been understanding as, Moral Relativism. And the lure of Moral Relativism, is because of the lure of intellectual humility, and moral toleration. But intellectual humility and moral tolerations, these are not Moral Relativism. So analogically put, well, you tend to say, fall in love with someone.

And because, you think they have these qualities. But when you find out that well, you have fallen in love with these qualities. But these qualities are really not there, in that person. So then, you realise that, here this love affair is a failed love affair. So in a jocular way, of course, that is to emphasise that, what the lure of Moral Relativism is intellectual humility, and moral toleration.

But both of these, do not entail, Moral Relativism. Now, summing it up in a form, that we can understand, that when I talk about, is Moral Relativism a claim about the process of moral reasoning, or a claim about the conclusions of moral reasoning. The answer is, formal. Because, Moral Relativism is a claim about, the conclusions of moral reasoning. And what is the conclusion? That there can be no conclusion. So, one needs to distinguish between, I may be wrong, vis-a-vis, there is no right answer.

And that is where, the notion of Fallibilism comes into existence. The Fallibilist accepts, the uncertainty of her frame of reference, but does not accept, that all frames of

reference, are morally equal. So, when somebody claims to be a Moral Relativist, is probably being a Fallibilist, where one is open to revision, one is unsure of one's position. But to be a Moral Relativist, you have to hold the view, that there can be no right answer, that there can be no right conclusion.

So, this is what a Moral Relativist hold. All cultures, are they morally equal. Because, when you look at cultures being morally equal. For a Moral Relativist, all cultures will be morally equal. Right. And for a Moral Absolutist, or a Moral Fundamentalist, that will not be morally equal.

So, when we look at say, cultures, if you go through the text, it will talk about female genital mutilation. Now, would you hold those cultures, at par with, or morally equal with, other cultures that do not follow it. So, once we look at, we are making judgements, we can converse. So, we arrive at laws, is when we look at, where can we have consensus. So, to be a Moral Fundamentalist, or to be a Moral Relativist, is to discard the possibility of laws.

The Moral Fallibilist says, there is a best way to live, but I may be mistaken as to what it is. The Relativist says, there is no best way to live, because the very idea is inherent, culturally relative. This is a crucial takeaway, quoted from the text itself, that when we look at the conclusion, for the Fallibilist, the conclusion has still not been reached, the journey is on. But for the Relativist, the journey is without a destination.

Yes, I think that will be an appropriate way of putting it. For the Fallibilist, the journey is on, with the belief that, there is a destination. For the Relativist, there is no destination. Because, that idea is itself inherently culturally relative. In passing reference, before we end our discussion on Moral Relativism, I will talk about self-reflexivity, which is the bane of any Relativist commitment. This is of course, a logical fallacy with Relativism, which is of a simple format, that any self-reflexive system will contradict itself, in the sense that well, if the Relativist says that, all values are relative, then this claim itself, that all values are relative, is this itself, the claim in this box itself, is it relative, or is it absolute.

Now, that is a tricky little logical problem, that all self-reflexive systems face. Because, they have to have one axiom as absolute. So, for the Relativist, if they counter argue, they would say that, this particular axiom is the truth, and it has to be held true, and the rest can all be held as relative. So, to sum up our discussion on Moral Relativism, we talk about, well, the lure of Moral Relativism, actually the lure of Fallibilism.

And to be a Fallibilist, is not to be a Moral Relativist. To be open to revision, is not to

deny that, there is a right answer possible. So, as put up in the earlier slide, to be open to the possibility that, I am wrong, is one position. But to believe that, there is no right answer, is another position.

And the Moral Relativist, sticks to this other position. Okay. Now, we come to this catch-all theory called, Egoism. Now, Egoism is a catch-all theory, because it holds that, all actions are motivated only by desire. Right. And that seems fairly reasonable, that well, all actions are motivated only by desire. But isn't there a distinction between, self-interested desire, and other interested desire.

Right. Now, if I act, in only what gives me satisfaction or happiness, but then what is it to act otherwise, or are these random acts. I do what I wish to do. So, to be an Unegoist, do I have to act, contrary to my wishes. Let us play it out, what is this talking about.

So, the Egoist talks about, all actions are motivated only by desire. That means, I do what I wish to do. But what I wish to do, is something that does not happen automatically. Right. So, a classical question asked is, why do you give to a beggar, assuming that you give arms to a beggar.

Now, one way could be that, I just feel good, that is why I give to a beggar. So, anybody who feels good about something, gives something to a beggar. But then, what is it that makes me feel good about it. And here is where, the folly of Egoism comes into play. That Egoists mention that, whatever I do it only for, which gives me satisfaction.

But what gives me satisfaction, is quite a broad area. Right. So, I can see the happiness in helping the needy, can give me happiness. By looking after or aggressively pursuing my own hedonistic pleasures, can also give me happiness. So, the difficulty that the Egoist, as in catch-all theory faces, is that, looking at happiness as something which is very narrow. Because, what and also looking at what one wishes, as something very narrow. When we look at, what I wish for, that wishing itself is a contemplative deliberative process.

It is not a process, that just happens autonomically. There is a school of Philosophers called Emotivists. In fact, not a school, but a strain, which talks about that well, whatever feels good, I do it, and that is right. And whatever I do not feel good about, I do not do it, or I find it wrong. So emotions as the, and primitive reactive emotions, not deliberated thought through emotions. We will continue the discussion of Egoism, in the next session. Thank you. .