

The Myth of Moral Neutrality

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Alice in Wonderland: words without meaning.

You must not impose your views on your patients. Of course not, we all agree. So you must practice medicine from a non-judgmental, morally neutral stance. Now here is a wild extrapolation. Judgement is at the heart of medicine and it is increasingly a moral judgement that is required when we say that certain habits are not good for our health. Only a world devoid of logic would think itself capable of such a practice of medicine without any foundations. The phrase “morally neutral” could be out of Alice in Wonderland, it might have been coined by Humpty Dumpty or the Red Queen. In reality it is like a square circle - not dead on delivery, but inconceivable.

Whenever I have given this lecture most audiences had to be persuaded of the intrinsic idiocy of the concept of moral neutrality; it does after all sound very nice, very tolerant, very Canadian. One group of students was unanimous that everyone’s ethical opinions are equally valid! Hence this paper might be called remedial thinking for those temporarily overwhelmed by the nonsense in the media. Thus I use the word myth in the sense of something accepted almost reflexly as true but not in the sense of fairy tales which are false but overflowing with truth.

Recently the Ontario NDP government has issued a document which is intended to guide education into the next century. It recognizes that value neutrality cannot exist and then proceeds to say that some values such as democracy and respect for persons transcend faiths. I hope that by the conclusion of this paper you will understand why I consider this view to be false.

The Devastating Why.

One has only to ask the question, “Why should I practice neutral values?” to expose the fallacy. The question can only be answered by proposing some far from neutral proposition such as, “To do otherwise would be insensitive or intolerant”. In other words, the proponents of neutral values are saying it is good to practice medicine from a neutral values stance. Now no one is going to argue that sensitivity to the feelings and beliefs of patients is not good but that does not mean that society can be expected to some other aspects of life. We rightly demand technical competence as the primary requirement from our surgeons, for example, and as I hope to convince you, we should do the same of metaphysicians. So having suggested that the idea of neutral values is not as innocent as it appears, I now ask, “What do the proponents of neutral values really mean?”

It is clear that a consensus about the nature of good and evil will greatly ease social interaction, indeed it is a condition for any sort of society. Presumably those who propose the neutral values approach think that this represents a small behavioral core which is all that is necessary for social peace. Clearly if all values can be treated as neutral they are not important. However the neutral values concept has some rather startling presuppositions lying just under its surface and these I wish to discuss because I believe they threaten the fabric of any society foolish enough to espouse so naive a view. Let us begin with a brief discussion of the idea of the good.

The Idea of the Good.

All societies share some fundamental ideas about what constitutes good and evil, at least until they are in the terminal stages of social decay. A healthy society prefers truth to lies, love to hatred, honour to dishonour and justice to injustice. It is true that we all have considerable difficulties in the translation of these ideas into the ethics of daily life. Different societies may view the same behaviours quite oppositely, as with suicide in the East and the West. Nevertheless all healthy societies try to achieve ways of living that can be thought of as good in terms of fundamental ideas such as truth, honour, love and justice. For many people these ideas may appear only in the use of the subjunctive tense - you ought to do this or not to do that. Such a society would be stable but in times of rapid change our metaphysical stability is always threatened.

In order for a society to refine its understanding of what is good and evil and to incorporate new insights into its laws, debate is necessary. John Milton described what should be expected;

“When there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men, is but knowledge in the making.”

Such vigorous intellectual activity is essential to a healthy society but those who espouse the concept of neutral values, which demands that no-one's beliefs can be challenged, necessarily suppress free speech. They frequently talk of zero tolerance for particular ideas, apparently unconcerned with the inconsistency of their pronouncements. To assume that human discourse can be conducted from a value-neutral stance certainly presupposes that metaphysical truth is either unimportant or non-existent and would logically disallow the idea of political correctness. The inconsistencies must be challenged before they are accepted. This is particularly so at present, because we have some deconstructionists and post-modernists who have a cynical contempt for any conventional understanding of truth and are concerned only with power – whilst at the same time they allow the naive to continue unaware of this fundamental departure from traditional academic standards.

Ethical relativity and anthropology.

One of the most common supposed facts, upon which arguments for ethical relativity and hence for the denial of objective moral truth is based, is to point to the dramatically different ethical codes found around the world. These are undeniable phenomena extremely well documented by anthropologists. But the essential question is to establish how we should distinguish between these different ethical practices to determine which best represent the underlying ethical principles. Over some issues we respond intuitively, reflecting our own cultural history. For example, in parts of the Sahel girls are subjected, by older women, to extensive and painful circumcision to signal their passage into womanhood and to preserve their's and their family's honour. In Canada we call this practice child abuse and it is forbidden. In other words, over this issue, we are prepared to say that our understanding of how the concept of honour should be translated into the ethics of everyday life is better than that of the Sahelians. Another example would be the inconsistency of those who want abortion on demand because any other approach would be an infringement of individual freedom, except when the abortion is for the purpose of gender selection in favour of the male because that is demeaning to women. Selection against Down's syndrome is presumably in some way not demeaning to the disabled! Who is right and on what basis do we judge?

Different ways of judging metaphysical truth.

At issue is the question of metaphysical knowledge and here we are in great danger, because on this point we certainly have no consensus in Canada. Nevertheless some form of consensus is necessary and the form we achieve will determine the society we live in. I wish to touch upon three major approaches to this question.

The first is found in the book of Deuteronomy. Moses speaking to the children of Israel in Deuteronomy 4 vv 5-8 told them that the law which they had been given was better than that of the nations around them and that those nations would recognize that reality. The essence of the Jewish position is in the concept of the “givenness” of the law. They did not create their own values but received the law from God and they believed, that precisely for that reason, it was better than natural human responses. The Jewish law’s treatment of the underprivileged, widows and strangers was in fact uniquely different from their neighbours in ways that we now consider enlightened. Moses simply said that the other nations would recognize the wisdom in the Jewish way. He didn’t say that their laws were more just, but that is how many nations came to see them in due course. Why did other nations change their views?

Just as we have criteria for deciding between alternative scientific theories we have criteria for deciding between ethical theories. The kinds of questions that help us are similar: which theories have the greatest explanatory power for observed human behaviour, which view is nearer to the truth which we can observe, more just to all, more loving, more likely to build a stable community, more ethically beautiful and satisfying? Ethical relativity is a result of human fallibility in relating actions to the eternal principles of truth, justice, honour, and love. Because we cannot definitively describe these principles does not mean they do not exist, rather it is their transcendence which makes them the stuff of poetry and story.

The second example is the Greek alternative. For the Greeks truth, justice, honour were to be approached not as gifts but as logically demonstrable consequences of rationality. In the Greek view, virtue was a product of right thinking whereas for the Jews it was a product of obedience. The two can, of course, be combined as they are in St Paul’s injunction “to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” Phil 2v12. The current debate about natural law and its place in a secular society stems from Aquinas’ great attempt to synthesize Greek and Christian thought into one cohesive whole. The biblical idea of the ‘Image of God’ provides a basis for hope that this can be done but the reality of our sinful nature stands in the way. Aquinas inhabited a tacit world, in Polanyi’s sense, that no longer exists.

The dominant modern approach stems from our self absorption. We say we create our own values. This is a seriously flawed theory because truth is made subservient to desire. We cannot, for example, control our desires, particularly our sexual ones, we must therefore rationalize them. This leaves us as prisoners of our own nature. Lewis expressed it like this:

“For the wise men of old, the cardinal problem of human life was how to conform the soul to objective reality (God) and the solution was wisdom, self-discipline and virtue. For the modern mind the cardinal problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men and the solution is a technique. The pursuit of happiness in the modern sense is therefore self indulgent. Man’s conquest of nature must always become man’s conquest of other men using nature as the means. But these powerful people no longer think of God and God’s laws as objective reality so they are controlled not by God’s supernatural ideals but by the natural forces of their own heredity and environment. Thus man’s conquest of nature turns out to be nature’s conquest of man.”¹

Hans Jonas expressed the thought like this:

“If the good is a mere creature of the will, it lacks the power to bind the will.”

Creating our own values presumes that we can put ourselves in a kind of moral vacuum, but once there, we have no reason to create moral injunctions except those that satisfy our desires.

Ethics and subjectivity

The assumption that all ethics are subjective expresses itself in such phrases as “good for you” or “wrong for you”. Subjective ethics would make it impossible to demonstrate that anything was always right or always wrong, independent of what a given individual thinks. In practice we all live as though objective right and wrong exists. The University myth of the student’s essay on existentialism makes the point neatly. The student had worked hard, organized a lot of material, written well and clearly understood much of the material but had failed to grasp the implications adequately. The professor, to instruct the student, gave a C. The student, incensed, returned to argue. After listening for a while the professor said, “Ah, but you don’t understand, I hate blue folders.” The student took the point and was given a more appropriate grade. For Justice, which the student demanded, to exist something beyond individual preferences is necessary. Professor Leff, from Yale law school expressed the dilemma eloquently:

“I want to believe - and so do you - in a complete, transcendent, and immanent set of propositions about right and wrong, findable rules that authoritatively and unambiguously direct us how to live righteously. I also want to believe - and so do you - in no such thing, but rather that we are wholly free, not only to choose for ourselves what we ought to do, but to decide for ourselves, individually and as a species, what we ought to be. What we want, Heaven help us, is simultaneously to be perfectly ruled and perfectly free, that is, at the same time to discover the right and the good and to create it.”²

Leff recognized that moral freedom of that sort would lead to anarchy but he could not solve the conundrum. He knew all opinions were not equal but couldn’t bring himself to accept the inevitable conclusion.

¹ Lewis CS. *The Abolition of Man*. Macmillan, New York, 1972.

² Arthur Leff, quoted by Johnson PE, *Nihilism and the end of the Law*. *First Things* 1993;31:20

Are all ethical opinions equal?

Only a moment of serious consideration is necessary to answer this question. To equate the ethical sophistication of the Greeks with the now extinct Ikt is nonsense. The Ikt were a nomadic tribe caught in a terrible predicament where their traditional way of life was threatened. Their responses were selfish and far from noble and led to their extinction. Similar foolish choices, such as the current adoption of crass egalitarianism, are destroying the University, because recognition of real erudicity is necessarily hierarchical. Grade inflation, also part of this process, is intrinsically unjust to the most talented. The conclusion of Leff's essay dramatically illustrates our dilemma.

“All I can say is this: it looks as though we are all we have. Given what we know about ourselves and about each other that is an extraordinarily unappetizing prospect; looking around the world, it appears that if all men are brothers the ruling model is Cain and Abel. Neither reason, nor love nor even terror, seems able to make us good, and worse than that there is no reason why anything should. Only if ethics is something unspeakable by us could law be unnatural and therefore unchallengeable. As things stand now everything is up for grabs. Nevertheless napping babies is bad, starving the poor is wicked, buying and selling each other is depraved. There is in this world such a thing as evil.”

Sadly, having demonstrated that his premise did not lead to a morally consistent conclusion, Leff did not re-examine his premise, and, as Johnson wrote in his essay, Leff spent the rest of his life on the minutiae of the law and never returned to the weightier issues.

Tolerance.

So far we have seen that moral neutrality presupposes the absence of metaphysical truth, that it espouses a moral subjectivity which is easily shown to be unacceptable and unworkable, that it necessarily accepts the equal validity of everyone's moral choices but nevertheless passes legislation outlawing some cultural choices. The primary virtue of the morally neutral is tolerance. The question is, “Can a society be built on the basis of tolerance?”

Tolerance and freedom are not supreme virtues.

No one likes to be called intolerant but it can be demonstrated that intolerance in certain things is essential. Consider the following scenario. There is a society in North America with the declared aim of legalizing sexual activity between adult males and pre-pubertal boys. “Eight is too late” is their slogan. Now imagine yourselves as parents of an eight year old boy who find themselves compelled to have one of these men as a house-guest for two weeks. He is charming, witty, intelligent and full of fun but he does have this quirk. Will you allow him unopposed opportunity to use his charm and sophistication to persuade your eight-year old that he is being deprived of the rightful experiences of every eight-year old? I have asked this question of several audiences. No one has said yes. There are activities which all of us will not tolerate and we feel no shame in displaying our intolerance.

What sorts of behaviours do we legitimately attempt to suppress? I would suggest a starting list of four - unloving, unjust, untruthful, dishonourable behaviour.

Love, truth, justice and honour cannot even share a sentence with the verb to tolerate. You do not tolerate love, you embrace it, you seek it; you do not tolerate truth or justice, you demand them and honour is admired not tolerated. Tolerance and compromise are not the stuff from which great societies, great stories or even great professions are made.

But tolerance is important. It is the oil which lubricates so many human interactions; but often its strength is to overlook error or wrong-doing, to have compassion on the human frailties which beset us all. Unlike truth, love, justice which brook no rivals, the proper use of tolerance involves wise judgement. To lack the necessary skills of prudent judgement will lead the defective into either bigoted narrow-mindedness or libertarian excess.

The necessity for appropriate tolerance.

Neutral values do not exist but we do need the tolerance they would seek to protect to adjudicate the conflicts which arise in our attempts to translate the unchanging but only imperfectly known truth into the working ethics of daily living. Human judgements on how this should be done are very culturally dependent, as even a brief list of practices considered ethical in different parts of the world in the last century clearly illustrates. Such a list would include: widow burning, ritual prostitution, infanticide, slavery, abortion and euthanasia. Changes in what is considered ethical occur very slowly but they are dependent on dogma for their foundation. Christians, for example, affirmed that all were one in Christ Jesus, that there was neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free from the time of Paul. But this doctrine did not translate into the practical condemnation of slavery for 18 centuries!

What is desired, and rightly so, is tolerance as a normal virtue in our human interactions but it is clear that the espousal of neutral values is not the way to create the appropriately tolerant society. Neither is the refusal to accept every opinion as equally valid truly intolerant; rather those who would demand such things are intolerant of logic. It is becoming apparent that the atheistic secularist has no adequate basis for tolerance because if this life is all we get and there are no individual moral consequences it is logical to use power to achieve your own ends. The Christian, on the other hand, believes in both his own fallenness and the ultimate unknowableness of God in His entirety and therefore has good reason to be humble in the face of contrary opinions.

The hidden premise.

Those who want a neutral value policy usually say something like, "You keep your opinions on morals private and I will do the same, and in that way we will both be happy." This slick piece of sophistry is neither true nor honest. The hidden implication is that there is no objective truth at stake - but, as we have already seen, in order to have justice, objective truth is necessary. We have to have means to judge. But I believe the real motivation behind the "I have my values, you have yours" argument is the objective of a libertarian society and this follows by default without the risk of rigorous debate, if we accept their argument. It is the old hatred of God in modern dress. Pascal expressed it most eloquently:

“It is the nature of self-esteem and of the human self to love only oneself and to consider oneself alone. But what can a man do? He wants to be great and finds that he is small; he wants to be happy and finds that he is unhappy; he wants to be perfect and finds that he is riddled with imperfections; he wants to be the object of men’s affection and esteem and sees that his faults deserve only their dislike and contempt. The embarrassing position in which he finds himself produces in him the most unjust and criminal passion that can possibly be imagined; he conceives a mortal hatred of the truth which brings him down to earth and convinces him of his faults. He would like to be able to annihilate it, and, not being able to destroy it in himself, he destroys it in the minds of other people. That is to say, he concentrates all his efforts on concealing his faults both from others and from himself, and cannot stand being made to see them or their being seen by other people.”³

Throughout history there have always been those who wish, as they put it, to be free. But unless we are good our freedom always deteriorates to license and usually to the tyranny of the few over the many. The bane of human history is the desire to be God, to be beholden to no one. The old Christian understanding of freedom is contained in;

*The Truth shall set you free, and
Whose service is perfect freedom.*

Christian freedom is freedom to be willingly a servant of Christ, whereas secular freedom is freedom from God. Conscience for the one is a gentle nudge towards truth and for the other the guilt trip laid on them by society.

Conscience

The first thing to recognize is that the word itself shows its origins in the idea that conscience is not a feeling but a form of knowing. We all have the experience of being inwardly obligated to do “good” or to eschew “evil”. This is true even when it is to our own immediate hurt, as with passing up an opportunity to cheat. This is not a feeling, indeed it fights against our feelings. This is moral knowledge. In most cases it offers no evolutionary benefit to our genes so that the reductionist is left with an explanatory problem. Whence cometh the moral law within? When one reads a law it is normal to ask who is the law giver! The objection, of course, as Leff clearly understood, is that if we accept this view we accept our creaturely status. A lawgiver, the legitimacy of whose laws we cannot deny, rightly demands our obedience.

³ Pascal B. Pensees. Penguin Classics. 978.

Conclusion

So what needs to be done to remove the illusion of moral neutrality from our teaching guidelines and replace it with a more sophisticated understanding of moral truth, including appropriate tolerance of different ethical judgements? First, those who understand the process that has led to the logical nonsense of so-called neutral values must start saying so publicly and doing what they can to redress the damage done. We might also demand that logic be taught to all university students. We must all examine our intolerances and decide whether they are bigoted in the Chestertonian sense of not seriously considering the alternative proposition, or selfishly libertarian and therefore to be decried and removed, or legitimate and therefore to be defended. Judgement is hard but it must be attempted if we are not to be left with a crude and debased culture. For tolerance to be properly exercised it must be held in tension with all the other virtues. This is what character formation is all about. It requires the development of wisdom which is quite different from the acquisition of knowledge and utterly different from the mere cataloguing of information which currently passes for education. It requires a recognition that metaphysical truth exists even though our knowledge of it is limited. Sincerity is not enough. As Iris Murdoch put it, "Our failure as a society is that we have substituted for the hard idea of truth, the facile idea of sincerity."

Life requires us to answer the age-old key questions or else to spend immense psychological energy in denying their cogency and paying the price for such denial.

Where did I come from?
Why am I here?
Where am I going?
How can I make sense of suffering?
How do I come to terms with mortality?
How can I believe in justice?
What can I know?
What may I believe?
What should I do?

For the Jews they were told that the critical educational environment was the home; the conversations at meals, on journeys, the practice of giving thanks to God morning and evening and of celebrating the feasts with joy before God. Moses taught the Jews that the reality of their faith in God must be lived out in the everyday environment. For us we have the additional promise: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." For work-ridden professionals framing life in these eternal realities is difficult and needs constant attention but if our children have only an education that does not have these foundations then they have only an education that is not worthy of the name.