

OCCC ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL -17 FEB 1991

TOPIC FOUR: THE CHALLENGE OF MORAL RELATIVISM & SUBJECTIVISM

D) The Challenge

A) Introduction:-

1) The Terms & Concepts:

a) Moral Judgment: evaluation of a person or an action by moral terms, e.g. Mother Teresa is a *good* person; Hitler's massacre of Jews is *wrong*; it is your *duty or obligation* to be grateful to your parents.

b) Moral Principle: evaluation of a *kind of thing or a kind of action* by moral terms, e.g. Seeking pleasure is always good; murder is always wrong.

c) Value: *intrinsic value* is something valuable & desirable by its very nature. Something is of *instrumental value* if it helps to promote intrinsic values.

d) It is common to make moral judgments & value judgments. Yet the status of these judgments is very controversial.

-*Moral relativism* believes that there are no absolute moral principle across different societies. A thing or action can only be said to be right or wrong *relative to a certain society*.

-*Moral subjectivism* believes that moral judgment is purely *subjective*, i.e an action is only right or wrong relative to an individual person. It takes several forms. The most popular is *emotivism*: moral judgment is not about any external thing at all; it only expresses one's approval or disapproval.

-*Moral objectivism* on the other hand thinks that *at least some* moral judgments are objectively true or false.

2) The Challenge to Christians: it is widely believed in the contemporary society that moral objectivism is untenable & "it all depends on your standpoint" or "it's just a matter of taste". Consequently it leads to moral cynicism & nihilism. Those who are so affected are usually underdeveloped in his moral personality. This is also an important obstacle to his self-development & search for God. It is very difficult to evangelize these people. Christians are often ill-equipped to answer their questions.

On the other hand moral doubt & perplexity also plague Christians in their unguarded moments. The Christian moral personality is also shallow so often- lack of conviction & insight, no consistent moral viewpoint, immature moral personality.

B) Arguments for Relativism/ Subjectivism

1) Metaphysical Argument:

a) Moral objectivism entails the existence of *moral facts* which determines objectively the values & our obligations.

b) Such facts are so queer in our current scheme of things that it is hard to believe in their existence.

c) Hence objectivism is untenable.

2) Epistemological Argument:

- a) Alleged "facts" which either i) cannot be ascertained by the scientific method or ii) are completely socially conditioned cannot be objective.
- b) Moral judgments i) cannot be ascertained by science; ii) are completely conditioned by society.
- c) Hence moral judgments cannot be objective.

3) Argument from Lack of Standard

- a) It is impossible to determine the correct ethical standard.
- b) Judgments which are not governed by ascertainable standards cannot be objective.
- c) Hence moral judgments are not objective.

4) Argument from Moral Diversity

- a) Moral judgments are widely diverse in different societies.
- b) Hence moral judgments can only be true relative to a given society.

5) Argument from Tolerance

- a) Moral objectivism leads to intolerance either within a society or between different societies.
- b) Only relativism (it is wrong to impose our morality upon other societies) or subjectivism (who am I to judge whether you are wrong?) can preserve tolerance.
- c) Hence objectivism is untenable & relativism/subjectivism tenable.

6) Argument from Moral Dilemmas

- a) No moral rule is absolute because it always leads to moral dilemmas, e.g. life-boat ethics, white lies.
- b) Hence moral objectivism is false.

II) The Refutation of the Case against Objectivism

1) The Metaphysical Argument: the existence of "moral facts" is *only queer in a naturalistic & materialistic world*. Christians have to be beware that many secular arguments are often presupposing a world without God. There is no obligation for us to accept this worldview. Neither is this worldview rationally compelling. It is crucial to distinguish *science* from *scientism*. Christians need to respect science & the facts discovered by it but there is no need to accept scientism which holds that *only* scientific facts are facts. This is so contrary to our experience. We should turn the argument around: "moral facts" are given in our experience; materialism can't accommodate these facts; hence materialism is false. *It is no wise epistemological procedure to assume a worldview & then decide what facts are possible. On the contrary it is sound procedure to determine first what kinds of facts are encountered by us & then to decide what kind of world it must be for these facts to exist.*

For Christians, moral facts are ultimately related to God's will which is grounded in his holy nature. The prime Moral Fact however is not a set of rules but a Person- the incarnate Son of God in which genuine goodness is *embodied*.

2) The Epistemological Argument:

a) The scientific strand: as argued above, the scientism implied in the premise is untenable. Furthermore it is *self-referentially incoherent*! It purports to be an objective judgment but it can't be so if it is true. It is difficult to see how science by itself can establish the statement "only what can be ascertained by science is objective". So this statement itself can't be objective by its very standard! Such position is hopeless. Scientism by its very nature is not science but philosophy.

b) Social determinism:

i) Such a theory is either universally applicable or not. A universal social determinism is again self-referentially inconsistent. (Please work the argument out by yourself.) A non-universal social determinism specifically directed at morality is not very plausible since we acquire our moral beliefs & other beliefs by similar process of socialization.

ii) Furthermore: note the *genetic fallacy*- the origin of a belief, i.e. its genesis, has no direct bearing on its truth or falsity. E.g. Kekule's discovery of the benzene ring structure in a dream. That a belief is formed by social process has no direct bearing on its truth value.

iii) Social determinism is only plausible when social process is all-inclusive. In that case we can argue that some social process can be also a rational method.

iv) It may not be true that moral belief is necessarily socially conditioned fully. Some moral judgments seem to be deep-rooted in human nature. On other occasions an individual conscience can go against the judgment of the majority.

3) The problem of moral standard will be treated later. Anyway it is difficult to argue for the *impossibility* of finding the correct moral standard. If so far our efforts have failed, it does not follow that any future effort will necessarily fail. Premise 3b can be challenged. The concept of personal judgment- rules & standards are very important but they all presuppose the power to judge apart from rules:

a) In applying a rule we have to *recognize* that an instance falls under the rule. This recognition can not ultimately be due to the application of a rule. Otherwise an infinite regress threatens.

b) It is common that in a certain discipline the practice precedes the set of rules, e.g. science, law, induction. The rules are found out by considering our judgments & not vice versa. In many cases the rules themselves are controversial. We have to exercise judgment to choose the right set of rules. Similarly it seems to me moral practice precedes moral standard. Just as without rules of induction people can still produce good inductive arguments, people may also be able to make good moral judgment without explicit formulation of moral standards.

4) Moral Diversity:

a) The form of this argument is manifestly invalid. Disagreement does not entail lack of objectivity. There is much disagreement about whether extraterrestrial intelligence exists. This does not follow that this is not a question about a fact. This only shows the lack of sufficient data to secure consensus. Distinguish between *descriptive relativism* & *normative relativism*. The former describes the moral diversity which is a sociologically well-established fact. The latter provides a norm actually- only that the norm is relativised to each society. The former by no means entails the latter.

b) The argument can be rephrased in a weaker form: that moral diversity is so striking

that moral relativism/subjectivism is the best explanation for this fact. The analogy between moral diversity & diversity of tastes is often pressed. This argument deserves attention.

c) First note that moral relativism *explains away* moral diversity rather than explains it. The analogy between taste & morality is not convincing if we attend carefully to the moral phenomenology. There are genuine moral disagreements: one thinking the other wrong morally or vice versa. We can't disagree about our tastes: we are *just different!* It is a principle of rationality to respect our experience. So the explanation offered by relativism is not satisfactory because it does violence to our experience. Moral judgment may be wrong but it is intended to be objective usually.

d) There are plausible explanations from the standpoint of objectivism. Firstly, it can be admitted that some so called "moral standards" are relative. They are better called customs or habits peculiar to each society. It is "wrong" to eat with a loud noise in Britain (my experience). There is nothing intrinsically moral about the noise of eating. So "wrong" can sometimes mean "against the customs of a particular society". This does no harm as long as it is not the *only* meaning.

e) However, at a deeper level customs reflect moral principles & at this level widely diverse customs can originate from the same moral principle. Consider politeness. This is defined by social conventions- yet all of them reflect the same idea that "we should show respect for other persons under certain circumstances".

An equation:

same principle + arbitrary conventions = > diverse judgments

f) We have to distinguish the level of moral judgments & the level of moral principle. Diversity at the former level does not entail diversity at the latter. It is because moral judgment is also influenced by factual beliefs. For example, a parent's child is starving. The parent gets a big salmon. Ought he give the salmon to the child to eat? He ought to if he believes the salmon is nourishing but he ought not if he believes it is poisonous! Societies who show diverse moral judgments also differ greatly in their beliefs. The latter may account for the moral diversity to a large extent. The case of geronticide.

Second equation:

same principle + different factual beliefs = > diverse judgments

g) Even in a field which is agreed to be objective, agreement is only expected when the knowers are placed in ideal situations, i.e. free from external obstacles & internal bias. Typically moral judgments can be corrupted by evil tendencies, vested interests & clouded by lack of sympathy & experience. These corrupting influences again explain a lot of moral diversity.

Third equation:

objectivity attainable in principle + corrupting influences
= > diverse judgments

h) From a Christian viewpoint, moral diversity to a certain extent is to be expected because of the Fall. Sinful nature of man is the greatest corrupting influence affecting our moral awareness: we just don't want to face the moral reality because we know we are sinful & we are under judgment. That explains a lot of diverse moral judgments. E.g. a selfish man may begin with pricks of conscience but end up with rationalizations of selfishness & then refuses to admit that selfishness is not a good thing. This kind of self-deception is well-established in psychoanalysis. Many converts also testify to this kind of moral self-deception. In the end the cure of moral blindness is not rational argument but encounter with the Holy God, forgiveness in Christ & regeneration by the

Spirit: we can freely admit that we are sinners only when we encounter Holiness & know that there is a *hope* of forgiveness & regeneration.

i) There may be still some examples of society which are so radically "immoral" from our perspective that we can't explain the differences along the lines above. Yet there is no obligation that we have to do so. Just as we do not accept their primitive mythology & "mathematics", why can't we do the same with regard to their morality? A primitive society can be so underdeveloped cognitively & morally that its "morality" is hardly moral. This does not show there is no truth in moral matters.

i) In fact anthropologists find a certain core of common moral *principles in the majority of cultures. The convergence of the moral code in all the higher civilizations is actually striking.*

5) Tolerance:

a) This argument is hopelessly confused yet still common. A relativist has no right to say that intolerance is morally *bad*

& tolerance/liberty is morally *good*. At most they can express their disapprovals.

b) A consistent relativist can be intolerant because if his society or he himself thinks that intolerance is right, then it is right for his society or for him according to this position.

c) A moral objectivist has no need to be intolerant. Tolerance may be one among his list of objective goods.

6) Moral Dilemmas:

a) Moral objectivism does not need to hold that any moral rule is *absolute*- i.e. it is applicable in all situations for all persons. It only needs to affirm that for a particular act in a particular situation an objective moral judgment can be passed upon it. The world can be so complicated that no absolute moral rule is applicable.

b) A moral rule may not be absolute but it can be approximately true. cf. the "law": all matter expands on heating.

c) Indeed the moral dilemmas show that while moral rule is not absolute the exceptions only occur when it conflicts with another moral rule. This shows that moral rules can be better formulated with *ceteris paribus* clause (all else being equal):

Ceteris paribus, it is morally better not to murder than to murder.

Ceteris paribus, it is morally better not to lie than to lie.

Then this abstract rule may be "absolute":

It is always right to do the morally better action, all things considered.

This rule may be vague but similar problems afflict scientific laws.

d) Prima facie duties.

7) The Case Against Relativism/Subjectivism

a) The relativist as a person is usually better than his theory. The case of the student writing an essay on "moral relativism". Moral relativism is hardly a livable option. Some of the appeal of relativism actually base on some moral intuitions, e.g. tolerance. These intuitions have to be taken seriously.

b) Subjectivism in the end collapses to moral nihilism: in the end there is just nothing good or bad in itself. This has to treat the human moral consciousness as completely delusory. I can hardly see any justification for this move. *Apart from our experience,*

we can hardly know anything. It is arbitrary to accord a privileged status to sensory experience alone.

c) There are some moral judgments which are nearly certain & universally shared: Hitler's massacre is wrong; Mother Teresa is a better person than Stalin; it is wrong to torture another *just for fun*; & so on. Every person has to base his view on the judgments most evident to him. To me these judgments seem to be much more evident than scientism or other reasons for accepting relativism. Hence there is no reason to accept relativism if you share these judgments unless compelling proof for relativism is forthcoming.

d) Meaning of life is based on objective values: something is desirable because it is valuable rather than something is valuable because I desire it. Desires can't *constitute* values.

III) The Path to Moral Knowledge

1) In the end moral knowledge is *personal knowledge*- knowledge by participating in the moral order & moral development. Not all knowledge is immediately available to man without suitable development. We have to learn to interpret a X-ray photograph, look through a microscope, to recognize a face, to distinguish stereo from mono, etc. These are learnt by personal participation & exercising of judgment. Similarly a person ultimately convinces himself that moral reality is there by participating in it: attention to moral matters, reflection on oneself, moral actions, fostering kindness & moral sensitivity, refusal of self-deception, etc.

2) From the above description you can see that a proper moral awareness is precarious: it can be adversely affected by irresponsible choice or a corrupt environment. (The Bible talks about our hardness of heart, e.g. Israelite & Pharaoh & a seared conscience, I Tim 4.2.) Sadly this is exactly typical of our hedonistic & materialistic society. Yet sometimes the moral nature can burst out, e.g. the reaction of Hong Kong people to the 1989 Democratic Movement; the example of my student in Matteo Ricci. That's why morality also needs Grace. Christians defend the ideal objectivity of morality but criticize our current morality which in some aspects is a compromise. We are not only called to be moral but to be holy. Holiness is a state of personhood rather than a matter of rules.

QUOTES

"But here also it is reasonable to combine a firm belief in the objective validity of goodness with a considerable scepticism about all our particular moral judgments. To say that they all require correction is indeed to say both that they are partially wrong & that they are not merely subjective facts about ourselves" (C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, p.69)

"Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; & in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, & the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise." (J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p.261)