

24.231 Ethics – Handout 8 Foot, “What Is Moral Relativism?”

Notes on Foot, “Moral Relativism”

A. What is moral relativism (MR) and what does it entail?

Foot begins by assessing various claims about what the moral relativist is committed to, largely by means of drawing an analogy to the more plausible relativism about taste. She thinks that thinking about the analogy with taste can show us that relativism does not fall prey to some of the common objections raised against it, because it does not entail some of the things people claim it entails.

- (1) Stevenson: Moral relativists interpret any moral judgment about some act X to be a reporting of a psychological or sociological fact about the reactions that people (perhaps the speaker, or the agent, or the society to which one or the other belongs) have to it. Stevenson says this shows MR to be mistaken, because (i) we don't defend our moral judgments about acts by pointing out how people react to those acts, but rather by pointing to features of the acts themselves; and (ii) moral judgments, but not reports of people's attitudes, express feelings and attitudes of the speaker, and usually reflect a desire of the speaker to change the feelings and attitudes of others.
- (2) Foot: Stevenson is right that the view he describes (which looks like a kind of *subjectivism*) is subject to these defects (or at least to defect (i)). But relativism needn't take this form. We're inclined to accept relativism about judgments of taste, but we wouldn't interpret our judgments of taste to be reports of people's reactions, since (i) we don't defend them by pointing to people's reactions, (ii) we think we can make mistakes in our judgments of taste, and that others in our community can make mistakes, and (iii) we think we can show others who belong to our community that some judgment of taste is the correct one.
- (3) Why think we accept relativism about taste? (i) there is wide-spread disagreement between cultures about such matters, and (ii) we acknowledge that while we might reasonably debate about matters of taste within a community that shares a common basic standard, there is no way to resolve disputes about taste between different communities that embrace very different standards:

“It is empty to say of the judgements of another group whose reactions are very different from ours that their opinions are wrong. Our own discussions of these matters of “taste” implicitly evoke the standards set by our paradigms on our way of going on from them, and here we can speak of right and wrong. But if we are talking of the views of another society we shall speak of what is true by their standards and by our standards, without the slightest thought that our standards are “correct.” If the ancient Mexicans admired the looks of someone whose head had been flattened, a proposition not *about* this admiration may have been true as spoken by them, though it is false as spoken by us.” (p. 188)

(Question: Should we be relativists about taste? Do we think we can't criticize the tastes of other communities, or of our community as a whole? Are there other options?)

- (4) Question: In those situations in which the differences in the applications of concepts between different societies are so widespread and irresolvable as to make relativism tempting, *why are we so confident that at different times and in different places the judgments are about the same thing?* (pp. 186-7) For relativism about a given area of discourse to be plausible, we must be able to understand people as employing the *same* concepts even if there are limitless variations in the way people are inclined to apply it. Foot thinks we can do this in the case of some taste concepts (like good-looking) but not others (e.g., pretty): “It makes sense to speak of another society as thinking good-looking just the faces we think not good-looking, but not as thinking pretty just the faces we think not pretty.” It will be important, in the end, whether we think we can understand cultures that use moral concepts like “good” or “right” *very* differently from how we use them as genuinely employing moral concepts nonetheless. (*Question: how do we decide which concepts are flexible like this and which aren't? Is “good-looking” flexible like this?*)
- (5) Foot distinguishes between uses of “true” or “false” or “correct” that are “*substantial*”, and those that aren't. We use such label *substantially*, she says, only when there is, at least in principle, some *possibility* of proving or showing that one view rather than another is in fact the true one. She says “relativism is true in a given area if in that area all *substantial* truth is truth relative to one or another set of possible standards.”
- (6) Foot thinks it follows from this that emotivists are committed to a form of moral relativism, since they deny that there are any objective criteria by appeal to which differences between individuals with radically different basic moral principles can be resolved. (*Question: does emotivism, which seems to be (perhaps) a form of meta-ethical relativism, lead to normative moral relativism – that is, to the view that it might be okay for one person to do something its wrong for another person to do, without there being any more basic moral principle that applies to them both that explains why there's this difference? Our answer here will be different, I think, depending on whether we ask it from the perspective of an emotivist making a normative judgment – he would surely make the same judgment about both cases – or an emotivist assessing the “correctness” of such judgments without making a normative judgment himself – from this perspective, it seems like an emotivist would have to concede that the judgment of one person, who judges she acted permissibly in having an abortion, is just as “correct” as the judgment of another person, who judges she acted impermissibly in having an abortion, although there is no more fundamental normative moral principle that explains this difference in standards.*)
- (7) Foot considers two claims about MR made by Stace: first, that a relativist must allow that the very same action that is right in one country or at one period may be wrong in another. Foot says a relativist is not committed to this view. Moral relativists are relativists about the *truth* of moral judgments, just as taste-relativists are relativists about the truth of taste judgments. A relativist doesn't claim that the same person who is good-looking in Ancient Mexico would become ugly if he came here, but rather that the same person might be good-looking-by-ancient-mexican-standards and ugly-by-our-standards (in all times and places). Correspondingly, the statement “X is good-looking” might be

true-by-ancient-mexican-standards and false-by-our-standards. We should interpret MR as making the same kind of claim: we can't employ two sets of standards in one breath.

- (8) Stace's second claim: a relativist is committed to the conclusion that if someone thinks something is right, then it's right for him, or alternatively, that someone who acts in accordance with his conscience always acts rightly. Foot thinks a relativist may have to accept this conclusion. Foot thinks we need to distinguish between two similar claims: the claim that it is always wrong to act against our conscience, and the claim that it is always right to act in accordance with our conscience. She follows Aquinas in thinking that the former may be true (indeed, she goes so far as to say that it "cannot ... be denied") even though the latter is false. (This is because acting in accord with one's conscience may be necessary but not sufficient for acting well, just as, e.g., being worm-free is necessary but not sufficient for being a good apple.) So: an erring conscience binds but it does not excuse. It follows from this that someone who has an erring conscience cannot act well. Foot argues that this is a plausible conclusion only if we think we can be at fault for having erring consciences. We cannot be in a "moral trap" through no fault of our own. But MR, she points out, leaves no room for the idea of an erring conscience, because according to MR, there is no universal truth out there to be discovered, which the person with the erring truth fails to discover. So if a relativist wishes to make room for the idea that someone with an erring conscience might not be able to act well, whatever he does, she must allow that someone could be in that situation through no fault of his own. But that's implausible. So a relativist will be forced to conclude not only that someone who acts against his conscience always acts badly, but also that someone who acts in accord with his conscience always acts well. (*Question: is the thesis that someone cannot be in a "moral trap" through no fault of his own itself a moral principle? Is it one a relativist must accept? Perhaps Foot thinks this is one of the rules for the application of moral concepts one must accept to count as employing moral concepts at all...*)
- (9) Would the truth of MR make it impossible for us to hold on to any moral judgments, or to "put our weight behind" any of our moral judgments, since we must acknowledge that the only *substantive* truth they can have is local, and not more generally defensible? Foot claims that acknowledging this would not threaten our ability to make such judgments or to throw our weight behind them (by, e.g., living in accord with them and trying to persuade others to do the same). She notes that we can acknowledge the localness of the truth of our taste judgments without thereby feeling we must give up on the idea that Nureyev is good-looking, oysters are delicious, and blue and green go well together. (*Question: But might morality be different? It seems like it might. After all, at least about some kinds of taste judgments, and perhaps precisely the ones about which we're most likely to be relativists (e.g., oysters are delicious), we're not expected to justify our judgments – in fact – they're just reactions. But we are expected to justify our moral judgments – to provide reasons for them. I won't stop hating peanut-butter just because I can't provide any reasons for it. But I should perhaps stop holding a moral view if I can't provide any reasons for it.*)

B. Should we accept MR?

So far, Foot has just been asking what relativism implies, and has used the analogy to taste to argue that it doesn't entail some of the counterintuitive things that have often been held against it. Now she wants to assess the form of relativism she has described to see whether it seems as plausible or as defensible as relativism about taste.

- (1) Remember that Foot claims that for relativism to be plausible about an area of discourse, we must be able to know that we're talking about the same thing as others who differ greatly from us in their applications of the relevant concepts. Foot argued that this was so about at least some very general taste concepts. She thinks it is *not* true of even general moral terms like "right" or "ought" or "good". Unlike in the case of some taste judgments, she thinks we cannot apply moral concepts in just *any* way and still count as making a *moral* judgment. You must be inclined to follow certain rules to count as employing moral concepts at all (otherwise, we're just making the same sounds, without using the same concepts – e.g. chair and bale of hay example). So Foot thinks that any culture that appeared to use moral concepts to, e.g., argue that the killing of millions of innocent people (by Hitler) did not need any justification would not count as using moral concepts – this is a view she says it is "impossible, logically speaking" to argue for. (We wouldn't think of such people as mistaken about what right, but rather as not talking about what's right at all, despite appearances.) Examples from other papers: the insistence that we walk around trees counterclockwise, or that we clasp our hands three times an hour, couldn't plausibly count as fundamental moral principles of *anyone's* morality.
- (2) But Foot thinks even the limitations set by proper use of moral concepts might leave room for some irresolvable disagreements between cultures, and so for some moral relativism.
- (3) How much relativism remains, Foot thinks, cannot be determined without first investigating much more deeply that we have such concepts as *happiness*, *human nature*, and *human flourishing*, which, she thinks, must be central to any conception of morality. Morality is essentially about *human good*. And until we know much more about human good that we do now, we won't know how much wiggle room the proper use of moral concepts allows us. (*Question: are all systems of norms we'd properly call moral concerned with human good?*)

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