

An Intuitionist Argument for Moral Pluralism

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Introduction

The twentieth century is the century of decolonization in which liberation of peoples in all continents has become an important issue. Many people in the West are now aware of the intrinsic value of other traditions and of the rights of people to have their own culture. That is why Western people are anxious not to be ethnocentric; we no longer want to claim that our values should be universally accepted, as this might indicate disrespect for other cultures. At the same time, this has led to a form of moral skepticism that might do more harm than good. If there are no universal values, if every culture has to determine for itself what is morally right or good, the idea of universal human rights becomes void, and constructive criticism of other cultures impossible. This is a well-known problem in ethics: our respect for a certain culture might imply that we have to tolerate that the rights, or at least what we take to be the rights, of individuals in that culture are violated.

This indicates that a reasonable position about human rights should be one that avoids dogmatism and relativism alike. A good candidate for such a position is one that is analogous to pluralism as found in political liberalism. In this paper, I want to argue that such an approach can be nicely combined with an intuitionist epistemology.

1. Problems with relativism

In this paper, the term ‘comprehensive moral doctrine’ refers to systems of moral thought from religious traditions such as Christianity or Buddhism, or from philosophical positions, like for

example Existentialism and Utilitarianism.¹ The term ‘dogmatism’ by contrast refers to the position that there is only one true comprehensive moral doctrine, and furthermore, that this doctrine should be enforced on other people. ‘Relativism’, finally, refers to the view that all comprehensive moral doctrines are equally morally justified, and hence, that interference with other cultures is illegitimate. We should distinguish between relativism as a descriptive or empirical theory: as a matter of fact different cultures have different moral systems, and relativism as a normative theory: we should respect the different moral beliefs in other cultures. It is not a necessary step to proceed from the former to the latter. The term relativism in this paper refers to normative relativism.²

Perhaps the most prominent motivation to defend relativism is that it is taken to be the most tolerant position. History has shown the immoral consequences of applying a particular set of values to other societies, so we want to avoid any form of dogmatism.

The question is whether relativism is the best or the only alternative to dogmatism. A relativist position has to encounter the following two problems: first, an unlimited tolerance will ultimately be self-defeating. Can we tolerate somebody treating somebody else badly because he belongs to a group of people this person happens to think to be inferior to himself? This indicates that the principle of tolerance would undermine itself by tolerating intolerance.

The second problem is whether the relativist can really live up to her own standards. The following example might show that relativism can be hard to realize in practice. Think about a non-democratic country in which innocent people, for example, dissidents, are tortured. The leaders in that country say that the universal declaration of human rights is just a Western invention. They make an appeal to their right of non-interference with their culture and tell people in the West not to comment on their anti-democratic practices. What is the relativist to

do here? Does she accept the non-democratic values that are held in that country? But what about the dissidents? It seems that the relativist in question will have to make a choice, namely, by either accepting the claims of the leaders or those of the dissidents. Making such a choice would mean that the relativist cannot live up to her skeptical position in practice. Refraining from making a choice though will most likely keep the situation as it is, which will as a practical implication mean that the claims of the leaders are accepted.

2. Neither dogmatism nor relativism

Again, it is not a necessary step to conclude to normative relativism from descriptive relativism. It seems that the twentieth century alone has enough striking examples to offer against such a reductionist view. There is a better alternative to dogmatism than relativism, namely, moral pluralism. The pluralism I have in mind is the position that there are some moral principles that can be taken to be universally valid. It is a minimal normative standard which all legitimate comprehensive moral doctrines should fulfill. All comprehensive moral doctrines that are in accordance with those principles are justified. In as far as a doctrine is not in accordance with them, and hence, not justified, such a doctrine can be criticized, even if it is in another culture. By pluralism, both dogmatism and relativism are excluded: neither is there only one valid comprehensive moral doctrine that should be enforced on all others, nor are all comprehensive moral doctrines equally morally justified.

This theory comes very close to the one John Rawls defends in *Political Liberalism*.³ It is compatible with various different comprehensive doctrines, similar to Rawls' overlapping consensus.⁴ But instead of limiting pluralism to a specific society as Rawls does, my position is that pluralism can also be taken as a claim about all societies. In contrast with Rawls who does

not want to say that pluralism presupposes any metaphysical assumptions, I want to emphasize that certain metaphysical assumptions are necessary to endorse a form of pluralism that does not collapse into relativism, namely the metaphysical claim that the pluralistic principles are true.⁵

There can be different accounts to explain why these principles are true. They might just describe the unconditional rules by which we have to treat human beings. If we conceive human beings as ends in themselves, this seems to imply that there are certain ways in which they are to be treated and how they should be able to develop themselves. And this can serve as the foundation of the view that we should regard all human beings as free and equal.⁶ A theist might have a further explanation for this, but still a religious and a non-religious person could agree that human beings have inherent dignity. That is why pluralism is not a comprehensive moral doctrine, since it allows for a variety of further metaphysical explanations, as long as they are compatible with the idea that all human beings have inherent dignity.

3. Pluralistic Principles

The pluralism I defend here is comprised of four principles, which are the principle of tolerance and three principles of justice. Let us start with the principle of tolerance. We saw before that the idea of tolerance means a rejection of dogmatism. But we also saw that in a relativist approach, tolerance ultimately undermines itself. Hence, the best way to accommodate the initial motivation would be to say that tolerance must be understood as ending where intolerance starts. This principle also entails that we should not enforce our comprehensive moral view on somebody else. This seems to be a good candidate for a pluralistic principle, as it is neither dogmatic nor relativistic.

Note that somebody would still be in accordance with the principle of tolerance if he

believed his own comprehensive moral doctrine to be the only true one but would not have any intentions of forcing it on others. This is because the necessary and sufficient constituents of dogmatism are, as said before, (1) that there is just one true comprehensive moral doctrine and (2) that it should be enforced on others.⁷ A Christian and a Jew for example have very different beliefs and may think their own beliefs are the right ones; if somebody does not try to force the other to live according to his own rules, he would not be intolerant, as the second condition for dogmatism is not fulfilled.

Furthermore, the principle of tolerance is enforceable without contradicting itself, as it is not a comprehensive doctrine but a view that is compatible with many different views, so the first condition of dogmatism is not fulfilled.

Let us now turn to the following three principles of justice: namely, that all human beings have initially equal rights including (1) political rights, (2) socio-economical rights - the right to a reasonable material well-being, and (3) community-rights - the right to belong to a certain group of people such as a religious group, political party or culture.

As to the relation between the three principles of justice, we can see that they can conflict as is indicated by the role they play in international law, namely, as being the so-called 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation human rights respectively, where the 1st are taken to be a Western ideal, the 2nd stem from the communist countries and the 3rd from formerly colonized countries. The communist countries used to argue that socio-economical rights would overrule political rights, whereas the formerly colonized countries defended the view that community-rights are most important. The Western countries instead took political rights to be overruling. The question about the hierarchy of these conceptions of justice cannot be settled in this paper, but all forms are taken to be initially equally relevant. Still I take all three categories of human

rights as primarily applying to individuals and not to a group as such, as this is the only way the problems sketched in section 1 can be avoided. It is in this sense that I will call all the different conceptions of justice 'freedom-rights': all people should be free to engage in political activities, they should be free from poverty and hunger and they should be free to belong to a religious, cultural or other community.

The principles of justice entail the classical prima facie moral duties such as, one should not kill or steal, as those deeds would be interfering with the basic rights of others. Note that those principles are widely shared among all ethical traditions around the world, so they can be counted as being part of an overlapping consensus.

The relationship between all four pluralistic principles is the following: the principle of tolerance expresses respect for other opinions and ways of life, and the principles of justice state that every human being has equal rights, and they specify what kind of rights these are. Taken together, the four pluralistic principles determine the rights that an individual has and how these rights are limited by the rights of others.

The four pluralistic principles should be taken to be the touchstone for all other moral views. The pluralistic principles have to be considered to be universal principles, their truth-values do not vary, as only then a foundation for pluralism is possible. All other moral principles are only acceptable in as far as they are compatible with pluralism. Principles which are not allowed would be, for example, those that imply the discrimination of certain groups of people, those which would be justified would be various forms of religion, sexuality and political convictions in so far as they are not in conflict with the basic rights of other people as stated in the primary principles.

It might be argued that somebody could adopt these principles and still disagree about

certain issues, for example, sexual freedom. Such a person might judge the limits of tolerance to be at a different level. Still I am not sure whether a convincing case can be made out of this. Imagine that somebody wants to prohibit the practice of homosexuality on religious grounds. According to the pluralistic principles, this person would have to show that practicing homosexuality is violating the freedom rights of other people. As far as we are talking about free and mutually consenting human beings I do not see how a gay or lesbian couple is damaging anybody's freedom rights. They might be in conflict with the religious practices of other people, but then religious people who are against practicing homosexuality are in conflict with the sexual rights of gays and lesbians. The pluralistic principles state that freedom rights are taken to be most fundamental and to apply to individuals; religious and sexual rights have to be considered to be derived from those freedom rights. If somebody condemns, on religious grounds only, sexual practices that are compatible with the pluralistic freedom rights, he implicitly denies the primacy of freedom rights.

Another example is somebody who is defending the Hinduistic caste system. Here a certain religious view is presupposed according to which somebody belonging to a lower caste has been a morally bad person in a former life. This implies that a comprehensive moral doctrine is taken to be prior to the pluralistic principles, which is exactly what the outlined theory denies. Reincarnation is a concept that is part of a comprehensive doctrine and not implied by the pluralistic principles, so any moral principles based on the idea of reincarnation are not binding under the pluralistic principles.

In both cases there is not an argument about how to interpret the principles of equal justice, but there is an open conflict about whether pluralism or a comprehensive moral doctrine is more fundamental. From the point of view of pluralism, we can say the following: somebody

should be free to choose to live according to the rules of a religion that prohibit her to practice homosexuality, or that tell her that she belongs to a lower caste. If such a decision is made under well-informed and free circumstances, it is in accordance with the pluralistic principles. But if somebody, belonging to such a religious group or not, does not want to sacrifice her sexual freedom or does not want to be treated as belonging to a lower caste, she should be allowed to exercise the rights she has according to the pluralistic principles. This illustrates the importance of the idea that the principles of justice apply primarily to individuals and not to groups: somebody can decide to give up certain of his freedom rights, but he cannot be forced to do so, unless he is violating the freedom rights of others.

4. Intuitionism as a moral epistemology for pluralism

The argument so far was that there are universal moral principles. But how can we get to know those? The view I want to defend here is one according to which we have a direct cognition of moral values. Such a view is generally referred to as intuitionism. All intuitionists agree that moral judgments are real judgments and not merely the expression of non-cognitive attitudes or consequences of our social conditioning.⁸ From the point of view of intuitionism we can say that the outlined pluralistic principles are an attempt to articulate our intuitive moral judgments.

Several objections might be raised against intuitionism. The first objection has to do with the fact that some intuitionists say that we have a cognitive faculty by which we obtain knowledge of moral principles. They refer to this faculty as the moral sense, the sense of justice or conscience. There are other intuitionists who find this idea of a moral faculty obscure, for example Sidgwick, not to mention many contemporary philosophers. But with Thomas Reid we can say that conscience just is an ability of reason, although I want to stress that reason has to be

understood broadly as practical reasoning, which also comprises moral emotions.⁹ This is much less controversial, most philosophers agree that reason or emotions or both are involved in our acquisition of moral beliefs. The moral faculty should be understood as the ability to make moral judgments, not as a not yet scientifically discovered sense-organ.

Still somebody might object that the basis on which one accepts the pluralistic principles is just too thin. How can we ever know that we are not mistaken? How can we really prove that the whole idea of pluralism makes any sense at all, as nice as it might seem? Since if somebody says that not all human beings are equal, how can I prove that he is wrong? In the face of such a lack of means of persuasion, does it make sense to speak of moral knowledge at all? Here I would again like to refer to the common sense philosopher Thomas Reid and certain contemporary analytic epistemologists.¹⁰ Reid and recent epistemologists have argued that there is no a priori standard by which one realm of knowledge can be considered superior or more beyond doubt than another. If taken to the limits, it is hard to find arguments for the reliability of perceptual knowledge and rational knowledge. Hence Reid's point was that the whole approach of requiring arguments for the reliability of any domain of knowledge leads either to circular arguments or to arbitrary standards.¹¹ That is why Reid turned the hierarchy of philosophy and common sense of his predecessors upside down: it is not philosophy that determines the standards of our common sense knowledge, but instead philosophy would be empty if it would not already rely on common sense knowledge. This does not mean the end of rationality and philosophy, it rather means that we accept that we might know more than we can find arguments for. After a long chain of argumentation and justification, the final argument might often be, in Chisholmian fashion: 'I cannot justify why I believe that I see something red. It is just obvious that this in front of my eyes is red'. In the case of moral knowledge we also end up

with such a kind of basic intuition. I can for example say: somebody has the right to exercise her religion because of her freedom-rights. But I might not be able to deduce her freedom-rights from any more basic conceptions.

There is also a pragmatic argument against a skeptical position: Indeed there might be a risk that I am mistaken. But I will probably never be absolutely certain about my moral beliefs. If this would mean that I might not act according to them, this would have fatal consequences. After all, doing nothing can have as many practical implications as any explicit action. So my refraining from doing something because of my moral skepticism might lead to what I judge to be the sacrifice of innocent people. This seems to be an absurdly high demand on our moral knowledge, actually an immorally high demand.

Another objection against intuitionism that has often been raised is that it would be an unsatisfactory moral epistemology because it would be dogmatic and ignorant of the problems of moral disagreement. But this form of intuitionism does not say that everybody holds exactly the same comprehensive moral views. Varieties of moral views are morally justified if they are compatible with the liberal principles of tolerance and justice for everyone. Here truth-values can become context-dependent, which means that they can vary through time and place. That this is so is exactly the content of the pluralistic principles. This means that a variety of other moral principles can be adopted. Here free choice as well as cultural or other determination and influences may play a role. On the other hand, relativism is avoided, as the other principles have to be in accordance with the pluralistic principles.

If the pluralistic principles are taken to be universally valid, they can allow for cultural and moral diversity. To abandon their universality would mean abandoning a justification for otherness, for the right to be different. And that would mean that relativism in the end, in its

practical implications, is closer to dogmatism than this form of intuitionism is, as relativism cannot give such a universal justification. So pluralism and universalism are not contradicting each other, pluralism even presupposes a certain form of universalism, and we can have intuitive access to these universal principles.

This form of pluralism is based on the view that all human beings have equal worth, dignity and rights, which in turn implies responsibilities towards others. This seems to me to be the clearest lesson of the twentieth century.¹²

Notes:

1. This is the way John Rawls uses the term, see his *Political Liberalism*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press 1996.

2. Normative relativism is rarely found in the Anglo-American philosophical literature. It is mainly defended by sociologists, anthropologists and postmodernist philosophers. There are also philosophers like for example Rorty who deny to be relativists but who also say that there are no universal moral truths. This seems to me an untenable position: denying universal moral truths implies by definition to endorse normative relativism.

3. Rawls, *op. Cit.*

4. Rawls, *ibid.* 15

5. Rawls says: 'Thus, the aim of justice as fairness as a political conception is practical, and not metaphysical or epistemological. That is, it presents itself not as a conception of justice that is true, but one that can serve as a basis of informed and willing political agreement between citizens viewed as free and equal persons', John Rawls, 'Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1985, 224-251. My claim instead is that it is true that all human beings are inherently free and equal, so the conditional for justice as fairness is universally valid. See also Kent Greenawalt, *Private Consciences and Public Reasons*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, 30, who says that Rawls does not want to claim the superiority of liberal democracy above other political regimes, and that somebody who 'is otherwise a Rawlsian' and who does want to make such a claim has to argue in a realist way - which is indeed what I attempt here.

6. I take this to be the most important feature of Kant's ethics, which is also reconcilable with intuitionism, as is the case with Robert Audi's version of intuitionism, see his *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997, and as I will argue in section 4 of this essay.

7. I owe this point to Michael DePaul.

8. Although they all acknowledge that an appropriate upbringing is a precondition for the development of our moral judgment.

9. Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, Introduction by Baruch Brody, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The M.I.T. Press 1969, 231-256.

10. I am thinking of externalists like Alston and Plantinga who also directly refer to Reid. I do not want to defend a purely externalist view though. I think a combination of some internalist and externalist features is the most appropriate, but this is of course a topic for a very different paper.

11. This point is also strongly argued for by William P. Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1993.

12. I want to thank Terence Cuneo, Paul Weithman, Michael DePaul and the participants in his epistemology-class, Kevin Meeker, René van Woudenberg, Simone van der Burg and Britta Schellens for discussions of this paper that helped me shape and express my views.