

Moral Values – Neither Objective Nor Relative

By Scott Rosmarin

Moral values are neither "objective" - timeless, absolute and universal; nor merely "relative" - to time, place and circumstances. There is another view.

To claim that moral values are "objective" means that they apply to everyone, everywhere, at all times, and that such values are absolute and unconditional.

Those who claim that moral values are "relative" typically mean that such values (1) are created by man (2) change from society to society and throughout time (3) cannot be grounded in any objective frame of reference and, therefore (4) cannot be judged by any standards outside of the culture or context in which they arise. Both of these claims are seriously flawed. Moreover, there is a viable alternative.

Plato on Objective Values

Plato was perhaps the most famous philosopher to espouse the view that moral values are objective. For him "The Good" exists in a transcendental realm of timeless forms, independent of human experience.

The Good is fixed, timeless, universal, certain. Since it exists in another realm, it must somehow be *discovered* by man. The Good is never *created* by man. In Western religions, Plato's transcendental realm becomes "heaven" and, in that realm, the source of absolute values is deemed to be God.

Criticisms by Locke, Hume and Kant

Plato's views have been vigorously criticized. In the modern period, John Locke offered an enduring criticism. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke argues that human knowledge is limited to man's experience of the world.

Locke believed that knowledge comes through the senses and from the mind's reflection on ideas acquired by the senses. Accordingly, where there is no experience, there can be no knowledge. It follows from Locke that, since man does not have access to any transcendental realm, he cannot derive moral values from it.

David Hume, in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, showed how *certain* knowledge is not available even about matters of fact within human experience. Only *probable* knowledge is available. But, if man cannot have certain knowledge even of matters within his experience, he surely cannot have knowledge of matters (such as moral values) derived from a transcendental realm, beyond his experience.

Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* asserts that any attempt to speculate about what transcends human experience is illegitimate. Accordingly, man cannot even *know* that God exists. He can merely postulate such existence. But, if man cannot even know that God exists, he surely cannot derive objective moral values from God.

Religion and Moral Values

Any attempt to establish objective moral values based upon religion faces insurmountable problems, such as the irrefutable historical reality that religions do not agree on moral values. These disagreements have encompassed such burning issues as pacifism, divorce, sexual morality, capital punishment, conduct in war, abortion, etc.

Philosopher Walter Kaufmann has shown, for example, that while many of the Hebrew Prophets were centrally concerned with social justice, Jesus, Paul, Luther, Calvin, Lao-Tze, the Buddha, and the men of the Upanishads were not. Kaufmann maintains that, on serious moral issues, mankind's greatest religious teachers radically disagree. Tolstoy disagrees as much with Dostoevsky as Lao-Tze did with Confucius, and Calvin with Luther.

In order to judge which teachers were right, and which were mistaken, clearly one must have *prior* moral standards. One must select and discriminate among various moral principles, and that requires standards independently acquired.

Moral Relativism

The failure of objectivists to prove their case has led many people to embrace moral relativism. Relativists claim that, since there is no objective basis for moral values, judging one set of moral values as superior to another is impermissible. It's said that all values are entirely contextual; that they are relative to time, place and circumstances, and there are no available standards by which to judge human actions other than those found in the culture or context in which the moral question arises.

These claims are untenable and, like objectivism, are challenged by a viable alternative.

Constructive Skepticism.

The alternative might be called "constructive skepticism." "Skepticism" because according to this view, the claim that objective moral values exist is unprovable. It's "constructive" because this view also rejects moral relativism, regarding it as absurd and nihilistic. Constructive skepticism asserts that a rational, responsible set of moral values can be created, providing general standards by which human actions *can*, and *should*, be judged.

Constructive skepticism starts from a position of intellectual humility. It admits that mankind does not have access to certain, timeless truth about moral values. Man does not possess sovereign knowledge of the "right" moral standards that he is able to apply wisely to moral issues. He must slowly, gropingly and fallibly seek defensible standards. How?

Walter Kaufmann argues in *The Faith of a Heretic* that man must undertake "the hard task of examining alternatives, criticizing what is open to objections, finding what gradually prevails and stands up." He maintains that, while moral values cannot be objectively "proved" they *can* be rationally derived and responsibly held.

Achieving this goal requires the following: (1) seek encounter upon encounter with various moral viewpoints, standards, values and world views; (2) subject all of them to critical analysis, asking what speaks for, and what speaks against, each; (3) analyze alternatives, subjecting them to the same inquiry; (4) consider informed objections or criticism by others; and (5) assess the ramifications to individuals and to society of adopting or rejecting each value under analysis.

By using this approach, moral standards are not "discovered" by man in some transcendental realm. They are *created* by man, based on the only tools available – reason, experience and judgment. Moral standards so derived foster moral judgments that are informed, rational and responsible.

Constructive skepticism precludes dogmatic adherence to any moral position. It condemns the refusal to modify one's views when confronted with new evidence or convincing arguments. However, it does sanction firmly held moral convictions. It insists on the right, in fact the *duty*, to judge moral actions, by standards honestly arrived at, through its slow, painstaking process.

Sources:

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3. Kors, Alan *The Birth of the Modern Mind: The Intellectual History of the 17th and 18th Centuries*. Chantilly, The Teaching Company, 1998.

Scott Rosmarin

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with a B.A. in political science, and Rutgers Law School, Scott practiced law for over 30 years - as an assistant prosecutor, defense attorney, civil trial attorney, lecturer, and general practitioner. During this period he took courses at many Universities in the New York Metropolitan area, concentrating on five areas of interest: religion, art, literature, philosophy and history. His research and writing skills, honed as a lawyer, are now being devoted to subjects studied throughout his career.

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