

MORAL RELATIVISM

A Socratic Dialogue

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Background

Through a series of questions, Socrates reveals the problem with moral relativism. This hypothetical dialogue serves as an introduction to moral relativism.

Persons of the dialogue

John

Socrates

John: Questions of moral right and wrong are subjective. They amount to nothing more than matters of opinion.

Socrates: Let's explore this. Are you suggesting that when you witness a specific action, you can't say with certainty that it is morally right or wrong?

John: That is correct. I cannot say definitively whether any action is right or wrong.

Socrates: Because it depends on your subjective point of view, right?

John: Yes. What is morally wrong for me might be morally right for someone else. It depends on their background and culture.

Socrates: What about torturing babies for fun? Are you unable to say with certainty that this is morally right or wrong?

John: I could claim that such an act is cruel and the torturer should be stopped. I would certainly attempt to stop such an action taking place. However, I cannot say that it is morally wrong because it depends on your point of view. Right and wrong is subjective. Perhaps it is wrong for me, but it could be right for another person -- even if I can't understand how.

Socrates: Okay. So although you can't say whether it is morally right or wrong, you think such an act should be stopped. Is that correct?

John: Yes. Baby torturers should be stopped.

Socrates: When you use a word like "should", are you not assuming that there is a way the world *should* be?

John: Well, I have an idea of what an ideal world would be like. But that is just for me. I understand that other people might disagree about my ideal world, just as I might disagree with their ideal world. But for them they are right. In fact, they are just as right as me even though we disagree.

Socrates: You seem to be suggesting that each person has their own truth value with regards an action being right or wrong, and each person's truth value is just as valid as the next person's truth value. In other words, it might be true for me that an action is morally right while at the same time it might be false for you that the action is morally right. Is this what you're saying?

John: Yes.

Socrates: Are you committed, then, to the position that your moral opinion has no more weight than that of a mass murderer or torturer of children?

John: They believe what they believe.

Socrates: Can I confirm: you are saying that the moral opinion of a mass murderer or torturer has just as much weight as your moral opinion, right?

John: Well, they are still human, so they still have a right to their moral opinion. Everybody has a right to their moral opinion. But other people may disagree with their moral opinion and try to stop them carrying out their actions, perhaps, for example, if they are hurting the wellbeing of others. I think I would stop someone who was hurting the wellbeing of others even though I understand that they have their own moral opinion. For example, Hitler had his own moral view, and I accept that what he did was right for him. However, given the chance I would still have tried to stop him.

Socrates: Why would you have tried to stop him?

John: I don't agree with what he did. I don't agree with genocide.

Socrates: But considering what you've said before, this is only a matter of opinion and your opinion has no more value than Hitler's.

John: Yes, that is what I said.

Socrates: Do you believe that Hitler's actions were wrong?

John: From my perspective they were wrong, but from his perspective they were not wrong.

Socrates: You said that if given the chance, you would try to stop Hitler. Would you try to convince him that his actions were wrong?

John: Certainly I would try.

Socrates: Why?

John: Because I think his actions were wrong.

Socrates: He thinks his actions were right.

John: Yes, but if I could explain my reasons, he might change his mind.

Socrates: Why would you want him to change his mind?

John: As I said, I think his actions were wrong and even though he has his own opinion of what is right and wrong, I think that I would have an obligation to try to change his mind.

Socrates: In trying to change his mind, are you not trying to convince Hitler that there are better actions, i.e. actions that are preferable to genocide?

John: I suppose so.

Socrates: In suggesting the existence of better actions, are you not implying a superior moral view point?

John: He has his viewpoint and I have mine. He has his standard of right and wrong and I have mine. They are equally valid, but from my perspective I feel the need to pass on my reasons to Hitler.

Socrates: Again I ask why you feel the need to pass your reasons on to Hitler? Have you not argued that his actions are right for him?

John: I have argued for that position. Nevertheless, we can't have a world in which people are free to commit genocide.

Socrates: Why not?

John: Because it causes suffering which makes the world a worse place.

Socrates: In saying that suffering makes the world a worse place, are you not implying the existence of an objective standard by which we determine what makes the world a good or bad place? Or, to put it another way, if you try to convince Hitler that his actions were wrong because they led to suffering, which makes the world a worse place, are you not referring to some standard that sits beyond the personal opinion of Hitler?

John: Well, the majority thinks it's wrong.

Socrates: Why do you think the majority thinks it's wrong?

John: Because pain and suffering is something people want to avoid. It makes the world worse. It's better to live in a world with no pain and suffering.

Socrates: Would you agree that the majority's view on what makes the world better or worse has changed over the years?

John: What do you mean, Socrates?

Socrates: In 18th century France, cat burning spectacles were a common form of entertainment. During these shows, dozens of cats would be gathered into large nets and then lowered into a bonfire to be burned alive in front of an assembled audience. The crowd would take delight in the howling of the cats as they were slowly roasted. These days we consider such a thing to be morally abhorrent, do we not?

John: We do indeed.

Socrates: But in the 18th century this was acceptable.

John: Things have changed since then. Our society has evolved. Our moral standards have improved.

Socrates: When you say our moral standards have improved, what measure are you using? What have they improved against?

John: Well, they've improved compared to the morality of the 18th century when people thought cat burning was morally acceptable.

Socrates: When you compare the moral standards of the 18th century with our own, then state that we have an improved morality, are you not implying that there is some independent, objective measure of what makes actions right or wrong?

John: I'm not sure. I don't think so -- except that it is good to reduce suffering.

Socrates: Comparing moral positions and making judgments seems to imply a standard by which you measure these positions. Is this not inconsistent with the claim that moral right and wrong is subjective?

John: I am unsure how to answer this, Socrates. Perhaps. You might have talked me into this.

Socrates: This has been a fruitful discussion. It has certainly highlighted for me some of the difficulties inherent in moral relativism. It has also prompted further questions regarding the existence of an objective moral standard. What could such a thing be? How could we come to know it?

John: Perhaps we could discuss this further the next time we meet.

Socrates: I look forward to it.