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This volume continues a long series of books I have written, taking a stand against various forms of relativism. My last book (*Philosophy Matters*, Blackwell 2002) argued that relativism ultimately undermines philosophy itself as an academic discipline. I now wish to look at alternatives to relativism in the controversial field of morality. I am also continuing my previous stress on the philosophical importance of the idea of a common human nature, forming the basis of societies which may at first sight appear very different.

The book took shape while I was visiting the Center of Theological Inquiry, a research institute in Princeton, New Jersey, for the latter part of 2002. The Center provided an ideal base for hard work and new inspiration. I am most grateful for the kindly hospitality I received there. I learnt much from colleagues visiting the Center from various parts of the world. I also received much stimulus from discussions in Princeton University, particularly at its Center for Human Values, and at the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions.

I was very grateful for a research grant covering the same period, from the John Templeton Foundation. The Foundation furthers work in the area of science and religion, and, although the grant helped me primarily with other projects, it also indirectly aided this one.

As always I have enormously benefited from the help, support and encouragement of my family. My wife Julia, my daughter Dr Alison Teply and my son-in-law Robert Teply have all given invaluable advice and criticism.

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Introduction

‘That’s Your Opinion’

A moral argument is often stopped in its tracks when someone refuses to consider a position by saying that ‘that is just your opinion’. The implication is that anybody’s judgement is as good as anyone else’s, and that no one has a right to tell others what to do. The fact that I do not like bananas may be a fact about me, but it has no bearing on what you may enjoy. Similarly, it is implied, if I disapprove of something, that may tell you about me, but it has no relevance to what you should do. The confusion in all this is displayed by the idea that we have no ‘right’ to tell others what to do. We seem at the same moment to be denying that moral claims can tie everyone down, and asserting that there is at least one moral claim that we should all respect, namely that we ought not to impose our views on others.

How have we come to this point? We respect individual freedom, and consider that we are right to do so. Then, in the name of that freedom, many deny that morality can ever be other than a personal, even subjective, affair. What seems right to me is right for me, but not necessarily for others. This seems very tolerant, and we all value toleration. Yet the ideas of freedom and toleration are not morally neutral, but are only possible given a certain kind of society, which inculcates a definite moral position. A society in which toleration, and individual freedom, are only upheld in so far as they seem right to individuals is hardly one most of us would feel safe living in. Too much would depend on the passing whims, and tastes, of particular people. We would all want the reassurance of a more substantial moral framework, perhaps underpinned by the law of the land.
The confusion endemic in all this is well illustrated by those who want a right of individual ‘privacy’ to be publicly recognized. They then extend the idea of such privacy to cover wide-ranging personal judgements about our own preferred lifestyle. Privacy becomes ‘autonomy’, and ‘autonomy’ becomes the right to make my own choices without interference from others. Yet a right to such autonomy, whether claimed morally or enforced legally, involves a demand that others respect my own choices. Since very few choices fail to have public effects, this becomes a demand that I do what I like, regardless of its effect on others, and on the public good. In any social setting, such a position cannot be sustained. By claiming rights to privacy, we make other people’s claims to similar rights unobtainable. We cannot all get what we want without colliding with others.

Morality cannot just be a matter of individual taste. Yet it is not just constituted by the customs and traditions of a particular society. We may want to criticize whole societies, including our own. In fact the same people who wanted to decry the idea of any universal morality, on the ground that it was merely an imposition of Western values, were the first to condemn apartheid in South Africa. If what is right is reduced to what is judged right in a particular society, white South Africa could claim to be a society. A common complaint was that ‘you do not understand our circumstances, and would think differently if you lived here’. Yet if anything was objectively wrong, the apartheid regime, with its systematic racial discrimination, surely was. Otherwise, no one could properly condemn it. Yet condemnation had to appeal to basic moral principles that go deeper than the particular judgements of a particular society.

We have to be pulled back from a position that tolerates any and every view, including those that preach intolerance and hatred. No one can consistently use moral language, except in the most cynical way, without recognizing that it intrinsically makes judgements, calls on reasons which are applicable to everyone, and rules out some possibilities. Some philosophers, even so, have maintained that this truth-expressing function of moral language is wholly illusory. Saying that something is good, they would hold, only says something about ourselves, such as that we commend it. It is not making any claim about the world.

We see in these claims the long shadow cast by science. Its success in modern times has been such that it appears that truth has to be restricted to what can be decided according to its meticulous experimental method. It seems that truth cannot be at stake, if we have no agreed means of settling a dispute. This was the position of the ‘logical positivists’, who defined claims
to truth in terms of our ability to verify or falsify them by scientific means. Thus claims, which cannot be checked, have no meaning. This view was propagated between the two world wars by the ‘Vienna Circle’, and it echoed through universities long after the Second World War. One of its main exponents in the English-speaking world was A. J. Ayer, whose book *Language, Truth and Logic* tried to show that moral statements were merely expressing emotion, evincing one’s own feelings and perhaps calculated to stir those of others. Moral statements were ‘emotive’, not saying anything. Ayer claimed that ‘it is impossible to find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgements, because they have none’.

Sentences expressing moral judgements are not able to express truths or falsehoods. They do not say anything at all.

This view resonated through society long after logical positivism was discredited as a philosophical theory. The idea remains strong that ‘facts’ are the province of science, while moral judgements are to be contrasted as ‘values’. Facts are objective, and ‘values’ personal. To say that something is a ‘value judgement’ then becomes an effective device for stopping a conversation. The idea is that no reason can be given for what appears an arbitrary subjective choice. This is reinforced by the dominant idea that, as it is fallacious to deduce a value judgement from any particular set of facts, there is no rational way of passing from a particular circumstance to a judgement of what ought to be done. It seems that our personal choices must not be constrained by whatever happens in the world.

The issue is whether moral judgements can be made rationally, and whether they be open to discussion and argument? Otherwise moral beliefs become mere facts about individuals or groups. Some have some preferences, or desires, while others have different ones. The temptation in a democratic society will be to count heads, or to conduct sociological surveys, to gauge what people think. Morality becomes a matter of opinion polls. What becomes important is simply meeting as many people’s wishes, or failing to offend as many, as possible. The opinions are basic data, so that the question is no longer who is right, but how many believe something. It is irrelevant why they believe it. Morality then becomes politics. Moral issues become the stuff of political negotiation. We are only concerned with what can obtain maximum agreement. Moral argument is squeezed out of the public sphere, to be replaced by political compromises. Any idea of principled reasoning is abandoned in favour of negotiations and accommodations between interest groups.
This is precisely what is happening in many democratic countries, particularly when they are faced with basic disagreements. So-called ‘pluralist’ societies with many different beliefs coexisting alongside each other may find this strategy a tempting way out of seemingly endless arguments. They can avoid moral questions and concentrate on the toleration of difference and diversity. Instead of resolving disagreements, they may hope to find a way of steering through them. The idea of law as based on a moral vision is regarded as illiberal and intolerant, and involves siding with some interest group against another. Yet the contradictions in all this are glaring. We may uphold tolerance because we believe we should not stand for one moral vision rather than another, but the idea of a tolerant society, protecting individual freedom, is as substantive a moral position as one could wish. In fact, it would still be repudiated in many countries. The ideal of total moral neutrality must always be an illusion, since it itself embodies a view of what a good society should value most.

A Just Society?

We cannot escape moral choices. The only question is on what basis they are made. Democratic negotiation may appear to be a way of avoiding irresolvable issues. In a democracy, however, majorities win, and minorities lose. One of the most influential of modern political philosophers, John Rawls, attempted to meet this problem by envisaging social cooperation as taking place under a framework agreed by citizens, before they know their own place in the society. He put forward what he termed ‘the idea of the original position’, which envisaged a hypothetical social contract, according to which agreements are made under what he called a ‘veil of ignorance’. The parties to the agreement have to establish a society of free and equal citizens, but they do not know their own position in the society, or what particular beliefs they might hold. The point is to specify basic rights and liberties, by eliminating what Rawls calls ‘the bargaining advantages that inevitably arise within the background institutions of any society from cumulative social, historical and natural tendencies’. There has to be an agreement on the principles regulating a society, without anyone having any inbuilt advantage or prejudice. No one knows whether they are going to be in a majority or minority, and, if persecution were to be allowed, they do not, according to this picture, know if they would
be among the persecuted. The assumption is that this device of representation of a contract shows that justice involves not taking sides, because we do not know which side we would be on. Such an idea is driven by ideas of advantage. We want to do, it seems, what is best for ourselves. The snag is that we do not know what will achieve this, and so, for our own protection, have to take up a position advocating fair treatment for all.

This is a powerful picture, but the idea of justice being purveyed is inevitably political, arising from negotiation and agreement. Even so, it is clearly influenced by the preconception that all citizens are free and equal, and that they should cooperate. I should not, it seems, be able to indulge my own desires without respecting those of other people. Rawls’s solution is, as he admits, an alternative to other possible answers. He asks, for instance, whether the terms for cooperation might ‘be recognized by these persons to be fair by reference to their knowledge of an independent moral order’. As an example, he asks if they are to be recognized ‘as required by natural law’. Rawls has no patience with that kind of view, and his generation of justice from ideas of hypothetical personal advantage depends on stripping each person behind the veil of ignorance of everything that gives them individuality.

Is the fact that we belong to a particular country, or even are members of families, of no moral relevance? Is it wrong for us to favour our compatriots or own children? Does ‘fairness’ flatten out all distinctions between people? An ethic might be thereby generated which not only seems devoid of human feeling, but seems to challenge it. Patriotism becomes something of which to be ashamed. Love of family becomes classed as nepotism. All this seems to go against the grain of human nature. We want to belong. We want to love our children. We may want to be loyal to our country. Are such impulses to be controlled in the interests of a cosmopolitan law, stressing our global responsibilities?

Reference to human nature suggests that we can never realistically leave it behind, and still be ourselves. Humans have desires and needs, which very often stem from a common humanity which we all share. This itself may give a powerful motive for seeing all humans as free and equal. Every time the idea of human rights is invoked, the implication is that being human matters. Those who uphold the idea of human rights, while simultaneously denigrating the idea of humanity, are going to have a hard time. They will have to explain who possesses such rights. Yet such rights carry even wider implications. They are often invoked in contemporary moral and