

Equal Rights is a Provable Moral Standard

There existed in Persia and Syria in the 12th century the much-feared Order of Assassins. Ensclosed in an impregnable fortress, the leader of the Order, called the Old Man of the Mountain, sent out his obedient minions all over the Islamic world to assassinate opponents, including sultans, of his particular Islamic sect. The Order flourished for a century before being swept away by the Mongols. Remnants of this ancient Order still exist in the regions it once dominated.

New recruits were first attracted to the Order by the liberal use of hashish (hence "assassins"). They progressed through the various degrees of the Order by demonstrating their absolute obedience to its ritual and to the commands of the Old Man until they reached the ultimate degree, the Inner Circle so-called, at which time the One True Secret of the Universe was revealed to them. I am prepared to reveal that secret to you now. It was - "all things are permitted."

"All things are permitted" - alas, the modern world is embracing that view with increasing fervor. Ever since the eighteenth century, philosophers and laymen alike have come increasingly to believe that there are no objective standards of truth and falsity, good and evil. All standards of truth and goodness are regarded as mere matters of personal opinion only; increasingly it is thought that the individual is the ultimate arbiter of what is true and good. This outlook we can call subjectivism, and it indeed leads to the view that "all things are permitted."

If each individual is regarded as the moral judge of last resort for his own behavior, then he can justify his own violence, or apathy. Democracy becomes no more justifiable than despotism. Stealing is not wrong if he thinks it right. If everyone lives in his own moral universe, then there is no way to reason morally with one another and passion replaces persuasion and might makes right. And in our own time, do we not see a rise in violence, apathy, despotism, crime and alienation? Surely we can find many causes for these manifestations, but unless our philosophies are unhooked from our actions - hardly likely - then can we not say that one important cause, and maybe the underlying one, of these current evils lies in the increasingly subjectivist outlook of our time?

The Unprovability of Subjectivism

As social observers we may deplore the results of subjectivism, but as philosophers we want to know, is it true? Is it, after all, the way things really are, the way we must look at life? In short, can it be proven?

I think not. To begin with, it cannot possibly be proven that the individual is the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong: the criteria of proof - consistency and accuracy - are the same for all individuals alike, and so a moral standard based on these criteria would be the same for all individuals, and not different for each one of them.

When we ask, "what standards should we choose to be the basis for our actions?" we are appealing to reason for an answer, and the standards of reason, consistency and accuracy, are the same for all of us.

The subjectist asserts that there is no provable moral standard, in which case he is asserting there is no standard by which his subjectivism can be proven. He is forced to repeat over and over, "the individual is the ultimate arbiter because he is the ultimate arbiter," which is nothing more than a solipsist tautology.

The standard for descriptive truth is: reality. When we say "the sun rises in the east," we mean to describe accurately what goes on in the real world out there.

The standard for aesthetic truth is: each individual's emotions. When I say "I like Mozart's music," I am saying it pleases me emotionally. Here is where subjectivism properly rules supreme - in the aesthetic world. Who would want to prove that Mozart's music was better than that of the Beatles? We could only end up by saying why we like it better, why it pleases our emotions.

The standard for ethical truth, however, is: reason. The ethical question is, "if we act rationally, how shall I treat others?" I may like them emotionally or I may not, which would be an aesthetic reaction. But if I appeal to reason, then I am in the ethical realm and must conform my philosophy and behavior to the standards of reason.

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At this point, the subjectivist is entitled to ask, "if there is a provable moral standard, what is it and how can you prove it?" Let us address ourselves to this challenge.

Let us begin by observing that consistency and accuracy are the hallmarks of a true statement. Without consistency, a group of words have no meaning and don't even qualify as a statement; e.g., "individuals have rights but they don't have them."

When we engage in ethical discourse, we seek meaning: we seek to discover correct ethical principle even if only to show that it is naught but personal opinion, and we seek to convey meaning to others and to understand them. To do all this, we should be consistent.

Consistency requires accuracy. Our statements about reality should be consistent with our knowledge of it. It is a true statement to say that "the Eiffel Tower is in Paris" because it is consistent with accurate observation. Accuracy, then, is a special form of consistency: it is consistency between our knowledge and reality.

Now we are ready to proceed in step-by-step form:

(1) We should treat things as they are as an end in itself. Consistency and accuracy require it. Our actions should be consistent with our accurate observations. Thus, if we want to find the Eiffel Tower, we should look for it in Paris. By that action, we treat it as it is.

To be sure, people often disagree as to what things are really like. They often perceive and conceive them differently. But this is completely irrelevant to the question of whether we should treat things as they are. We can't disprove a "should" (as in "we should treat things as they are") with an "is" (as in "we often disagree").

Note the qualifier, "as an end in itself." Ethics is concerned with ends, not means. Once we determine what the proper ends of human behavior are, then we can judge which means are best suited to adapt current circumstances to the proper ends. This qualifier should be understood to be appended to all the following propositions.

(2) We should be free limited only by the duty to treat things as they are. This is merely a re-statement of Proposition (1), put into a more usable form. After all, if we should treat things as they are, then this can be the only limitation on our freedom. I can't think of any other provable limitation, and if one existed, it would necessarily limit our duty to treat things as they are, so another limitation on our freedom could not exist.

(3) We have the right to be free limited only by the duty to treat things as they are. Surely, we have a right to do what we should do. To say that we should obey the traffic laws but don't have the right to do so is inconsistent meaninglessness.

(4) When dealing with others, we have the right to be free limited only by the duty to treat them as they are. We should treat all things as they are, including people. But note that since we all have the same right to be free, then our right to be free is limited by the duty to treat others as having the same right to be free. Or put more simply,

(5) Our right to be free is limited by the equal rights of others. Q.E.D.

(6) Each person has a right to his life limited only by the equal rights of others, since each of us has the right to be free. Life is the sum total of all our freedoms. Respect a person's right to be free and you must automatically accord him the right to his life. But note that even this right is limited; it is not absolute.

(7) Each person has a right to his property limited only by the equal rights of others. If a person has the right to be free, he has the right to freely exchange his labor for the goods and services of others, which is to say that he has the right of property in those things. But this cannot justify monopoly. This can justify the ownership of capital such as factories and machinery since these goods are the product of labor. It can also justify the inheritance of justly owned wealth, since an inheritance is a gift and people can give their property away when and to whom they wish.

To this David Hume adds his confirmation: "Whatever is produced by man's art or industry, ought, forever, be secure to him." Or until he sells it, I would add.

But since labor is the sole justification of private property, neither slaves nor untaxed land can be justly exchanged or owned, since they are not the product of labor. Because no one should have an exclusive right to own land, we all have

a common right to it, but the most practical way to accomplish this is to allow the private ownership of land sites while requiring the owners to pay for their privilege in the form of an annual tax which would be in lieu of as many other taxes as possible on privately produced labor and capital. Interestingly, such a tax is much advocated by leading tax and land use authorities and has worked well where tried.

If the equal rights standard is provably true, then we have established the moral basis for democracy. Since a democratic government has as its central purpose the protection of these rights, it is uniquely moral. But the means for determining exactly how to protect these rights should be vested in the majority or their representatives since we would all then have an equal vote; if a minority ruled, the individuals composing it would have more voting power than the individuals in the majority. But as always, the power of the majority should be limited by the equal rights of every individual. Only a democracy approaches this desirable arrangement.

If we have proven that all individuals have a right to their life, liberty and property limited only by the equal rights of others, then we have a proven moral standard against which all motives and actions should be judged. Reason can provide a provable purpose for individual and social life and we can see that the dangerously growing popularity of subjectivism has no basis in moral philosophy.

The Old Man of the Mountain was wrong. All things are not permitted and if we recoil from the consequences wreaked by the Order of Assassins, then we must also recoil from their central percept.

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