

## Relative Values: A Dialogue

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JILL: We've been talking about whether values are subjective or objective. I believe that certain basic values are objective.

JACK: Certain values may be objective *for you*, but you cannot say that they are objective period.

JILL: I don't see why not.

JACK: Well, name me some objective values.

JILL: How about: Murder is wrong!

JACK: Well, murder may be wrong for you, but what about people for whom it is OK? What about cannibalistic societies? What about war? What about capital punishment?

JILL: OK. What about: Terrorism is wrong! The random killing of innocent civilians is wrong!

JACK: But one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter.

JILL: Let's stop talking in the abstract. Look, take the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Timothy McVeigh bombs a government building in downtown Oklahoma City, killing 168 people and injuring 400 others. 19 of the victims are children. What McVeigh did was wrong.

JACK: Wrong *for you*.

JILL: No, just wrong. I don't know what you mean by all this "for you" stuff. Are you saying that the statement "I believe that murder is wrong" is equivalent to the statement "Murder is wrong for me"?

JACK: Pretty much.

JILL: OK, that's an interesting way of putting it. But note that when I say "I believe that murder is wrong", what I actually believe is not that murder-is-wrong-for-me, but that

murder-is-wrong-period - i.e. that murder is wrong irrespective of what I or anyone else happens to believe. And that's what I mean when I say that what McVeigh did was wrong, and that certain basic values are objective..

JACK: But McVeigh presumably thought that what he was doing was right.

JILL: Well, he was wrong to think that what he was doing was right.

JACK: But you have no right to say that what he was doing was wrong absolutely. You're not God. All you can say is that from your point of view it was wrong.

JILL: If you're telling me that I have no right to say that what McVeigh did was wrong absolutely, then you have no right to say that I have no right to say that!

JACK: Now, you're just trying to be clever. Look, I don't like what McVeigh did, but that's just my personal feeling.

JILL: But there must be more to it than personal feelings. After all, we incarcerate murderers and terrorists. What if at his trial McVeigh's defence was that as far as he was concerned, what he did was OK. So he thinks he did the right thing in blowing up the government building in Oklahoma City, and the jury thinks he did the wrong thing. If there's no way of arbitrating between these two views, then we surely have no right to lock McVeigh up.

JACK: Well, we have to protect society.

JILL: So it's right to protect the innocent?

JACK: Yes. Right *for us*.

JILL: What you appear to be saying is that there is no real difference between morality and tastes, that we just *happen* to feel that what McVeigh did was wrong and that we just *happen* to feel that innocent people should be protected.

JACK: Yes, that's pretty much what I think.

JILL: But that's absurd. We don't just *happen* to have the moral beliefs that we have. They are the reflective product of an entire cultural tradition. I don't just wake up one day and suddenly feel that murder and terrorism are wrong.

JACK: We have the beliefs that we have because of the way in which we've been brought up. If we'd all grown up in a society that approved of acts of terrorism, then we probably wouldn't object to what McVeigh did.

JILL: I'm not sure I can imagine that kind of society.

JACK: Try thinking about how countries act in times of war. That should give you a reasonable approximation.

JILL: Well, I believe that there are such things as war crimes, and I also believe that if a society seriously approved of random acts of terrorism, then it would be a sick society.

JACK: But if you grew up in such a society you wouldn't think the way you do now.

JILL: Maybe not, but then I'd be horribly deluded. If I had grown up in a society that believed that the earth was flat, then I would believe that the earth was flat. But that would do nothing to show that the earth *is* flat.

JACK: That just shows that there is a difference between scientific facts and moral values. We can, after all, *prove* that the earth is round. But you can't prove that murder is wrong.

JILL: I agree that there is *some* difference between science and morality, but that doesn't mean that all our values are merely subjective. Let me take the most extreme case that I can think of: random torture - torturing other people just because one feels like it. That is absolutely wrong.

JACK: My point is that you cannot prove that it's wrong. It's just your personal feeling that it's wrong - a feeling with which I happen to agree. After all, there may be some people in the world who see nothing wrong with random torture.

JILL: I agree with you. I can't prove that random torture is wrong, but that is simply because it is self-evident. It doesn't need any further proof. You can't *prove* that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , but that doesn't mean that it's just your personal feeling that it's true. And the fact that there may be a few rationally challenged people in the world who don't believe that  $2 + 2 = 4$  is irrelevant to the truth of the matter. It simply shows that when it comes to mathematics some people are morons. In the same way, I also believe that some people are ethical morons.

JACK: That's not a good analogy. I *can* prove that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . I get two apples and another two apples and then make you count them.

JILL: In that case, I can prove that random torture is wrong. I take you some place where innocent people are being tortured and make you watch.

JACK: But that doesn't prove that it's wrong. It simply "proves" that you have a feeling of revulsion when you see innocent people being tortured.

JILL: Well, you haven't proved that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . All that you have proved - assuming that your eyes are not deceiving you and that you are not dreaming - is that *in this particular case*  $2 + 2 = 4$ . You have done nothing to prove the general truth that two plus two is

*always* equal to four.

JACK: You're making a very good debating point, but only by appealing to the topsy-turvy world of philosophy, which, as everyone knows, has no relation to the real world. However, for the sake of the argument, I shall let that pass. Given what you have just said, it seems to me that you are now implicitly admitting that there are no absolute moral values. For if nothing - not even arithmetic - is certain, then there can be no absolutes in any area, least of all in morality.

JILL: Absolutely not! You clearly aren't getting my point. I'm not arguing for radical scepticism - I'm simply saying that *by your standards* we can't be certain of anything.

JACK: But we can't, can we? I mean you can't even prove that the whole of your life isn't just some weird dream and that we are all simply figments of your imagination.

JILL: That kind of blanket scepticism just isn't interesting and does nothing to illuminate experience.

JACK: Maybe not. But you can't disprove it, can you?

JILL: It depends what you mean by *proof*. If your model for proof is mathematics, then I cannot disprove that life isn't a dream. The fact, however, remains that it isn't a dream.

JACK: But how do you know?

JILL: It's intuitively obvious that life isn't a dream; just as it is intuitively obvious that  $2 + 2 = 4$  and intuitively obvious that random torture is wrong. I'm not interested in arguing about some kind of blanket idiot scepticism. My claim is that there are a few basic moral insights which are as certain as anything is certain.

JACK: But who are you to say that your basic moral insights are the correct ones? And how come there has been so little agreement about what these insights are?

JILL: Actually, I think there has been quite a lot of agreement. But in any case I am not claiming that my beliefs are *necessarily* true. That, indeed, would be to claim the status of God. The possibility of error is built into all our beliefs; but, in the absence of error, if you have a belief about something, then you believe that it is true independent of the fact that you happen to believe it.

JACK: If, as you say, the possibility of error is always present, that surely means that you can never be certain about anything. It follows that you can say only that something is true *for you* - which is exactly what I have been arguing all along.

JILL: You seem to think that if we cannot achieve certainty, then any opinion is as good as any other - and that is a big mistake. It is a dangerous and misguided democratic

prejudice to believe that all moral beliefs are of equal value, and such a belief flies in the face of common sense.

JACK: So, according to you, some beliefs are inherently better than others! Hm, that's the kind of arrogance that led to Western imperialism. That's how the Europeans thought when they arrived in Africa and the Americas and forcibly converted the indigenous peoples to Christianity. That's the kind of arrogance that rides roughshod over other cultures and thinks it has nothing to learn from them.

JILL: It's hardly appropriate for you to adopt that condemnatory tone. After all, you are the one who is a relativist - not me.

JACK: What do you mean?

JILL: Well, your position commits you to saying that what the European imperialists did was right for them, and that there is no higher standard according to which we can judge and condemn them. Of course, what they did was wrong for the indigenous people, but the Europeans were the ones with the guns, so they triumphed. Since, on your view, there is no truth of the matter and hence nothing to argue about, moral disagreement amounts to nothing more than a power struggle. Might is right.

JACK: No, you're the one who's in error. You believe in moral absolutes and that commits you to saying that some cultures are better than others, in the sense that some cultures are closer to the absolute moral truth. That's cultural racism.

JILL: You, on the other hand, are saying that, independent of the evidence, all cultures' ethical beliefs are of equal value. Now, that may, at first glance, sound open-minded and tolerant, but in reality it is the result of some very confused thinking. Consider a culture based on Nazi values. You would surely agree that it is in some sense worse than a culture based on the principles of human rights and tolerance?

JACK: You use the word tolerance, but your own position is a very intolerant one, and your reference to Nazism is simply muddying the waters. We can, I'm sure, both agree that Nazism is loathsome and odious; but with respect to our disagreement, this leads us nowhere. What I object to in your position is the presumptuous belief that, in a multi-cultural world, we have the right to dismiss some belief systems without a second thought. Do you honestly think that we have nothing to learn from other cultures?

JILL: That is not what I meant at all. Such an automatic and thoughtless dismissal of an alien way of life would, I agree, be quite unacceptable. What I would advocate is thoughtful dialogue between cultures; but I would want to keep in play the idea that at the end of this process we might come to the conclusion that some cultures are in some respects better than others.

JACK: But that would be a conversation of condescension. In any such conversation

you would be bound to believe from the start that your own views were better than those of your interlocutor. You wouldn't truly believe that you had anything to learn from them.

JILL: On the contrary, it is you who is committed to saying that we have nothing to learn from other cultures.

JACK: I don't see how.

JILL: Well, if you know from the start that all cultures and all opinions are of equal values, then no one has anything to learn from any one at all. Conversation - *all* conversation - then ceases to have any kind of educative function and it becomes nothing more than a way of passing the time.

JACK: Well, this has been an interesting conversation, and it has indeed passed the time; but you've done nothing to convince me of the falsity of relativism.

JILL: All I can say is that relativism may be true for you, but it is certainly not true for me.