

Does Philosophy Matter? – It Would Appear So.

A Reply to Stanley Fish

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In a piece provocatively entitled “Does Philosophy Matter?” Stanley Fish sets out to respond to my July 24, 2011 *Stone* column on moral relativism in the New York Times. His argument proceeds as follows. First, Fish changes the topic: instead of talking about the thesis I was discussing, he defines another thesis that, he claims, implausibly, also deserves to be called “moral relativism.” This thesis, he implies, is both more interesting and more defensible than the one I was criticizing. Second, he argues that neither his thesis nor mine could make any difference to “real life,” because philosophical conclusions don’t travel outside the seminar room.

His argument limps at both stages. Fish’s ‘relativism’ is neither relativism, nor interesting in its own right. And his claim that no philosophical or meta-ethical thesis can matter in real life is clearly false.¹

Fish says that he will go along with defining “moral relativism” as the “denial of moral absolutes.” But he says that

the definition is insufficiently nuanced because there are (at least) two ways of denying moral absolutes. You can say “I don’t believe there are any” or you can say “I believe there are moral absolutes but (a) there are too many candidates for membership in that category and (b) there is no device, mechanical test, algorithm or knock-down argument for determining which candidates are the true ones.”

The person (and I am one) who takes this second position denies nothing except the possibility (short of force and torture and they don’t count) of securing universal assent. You might say that he or she is a moral absolutist but an epistemological relativist – someone who doesn’t think there is a trump-card that, when played, will bring your interlocutor over to your side, but does think

¹ Fish’s article begins with an error about what I said about his 2001 op-ed, “Condemnation without Absolutes.”

... Paul Boghossian cites a 2001 op-ed of mine as an example of the contradictions relativists fall into. At one moment, he says, I declare the unavailability of “independent standards” for deciding between rival accounts of a matter, and in the next moment I am offering counsel [empathetic understanding] that is “perfectly consistent with the endorsement of moral absolutes.”

The slide from the one view to the other is not cited by me as an example of the sort of incoherence that relativists fall into, but rather as an example of the sloppiness to which people not trained in philosophy are sometimes prone, giving non-equivalent formulations of what they take to be the same view. As I explained in a footnote, Fish begins his op-ed by formulating a view that looks relativistic, but ends up claiming that all that it amounts to is the recommendation that we seek empathetic understanding of our opponents, a recommendation that is both good counsel and completely consistent with the acceptance of moral absolutes. As we shall see, an inability to tell the difference between two philosophical positions continues to plague Fish’s thinking.

that that there are any number of cards...that might, in particular circumstances and given the history and interests of those in the conversation, produce a change of mind.

It is odd for Fish to think that one way for a person to “deny moral absolutes” is for him to affirm a sentence that begins with: “I believe there are moral absolutes...” Furthermore, to say, “I believe there are moral absolutes, but no mechanical or infallible ways of determining what they are,” could *at best* be called a form of moral *skepticism* not moral *relativism*. It’s a view about our capacity to *know* what the absolute moral facts are, not a view about their very existence. But it is the existence of such facts that relativists are concerned to deny.

Indeed, Fish’s thesis couldn’t even be considered a good formulation of moral *skepticism*, since skepticism requires doubting that moral knowledge is achievable. But it is consistent with claiming that moral knowledge *is* achievable to maintain that it can’t be achieved mechanically, algorithmically or with the sort of demonstrative force that is guaranteed to persuade all of one’s opponents. (Compare: it is consistent with thinking that knowledge of evolution is achievable to maintain that it can’t be achieved mechanically, algorithmically or with the sort of demonstrative force that is guaranteed to persuade all creationists.)

What Fish is calling “moral relativism,” then, is the claim that, while there are moral absolutes, and while we can know what they are, we cannot claim to know what they are in some mechanical or algorithmic way; nor can we claim that our knowledge is so indubitable that it can be counted upon to sway all of one’s opponents.

Two things I hope are clear. First, this could not possibly be the thesis that animates most relativists, and which I was concerned to discuss. That thesis is motivated by the reflection that it is mysterious how absolute facts about morality could be built into the impersonal fabric of the universe. That mystery would clearly still be with us even if we were relativists in Fish’s sense.

Second, Fish’s brand of “moral relativism” is an extremely bland thesis that no one would want to deny. As we can see from the ongoing dispute between evolutionists and creationists, trump cards that can settle disputes decisively don’t exist in the natural sciences. Indeed, given the long history of controversy about the axioms of mathematics and set theory, and the inference rules of logic, such trump cards don’t exist *even* in the mathematical or logical sciences. Who, then, could reasonably expect them in the realm of morality? (And no, I wouldn’t call this bland view “epistemological relativism.” A much more interesting view goes by that name.)

Having argued that this bland thesis is all he means to defend by calling himself a moral relativist, Fish proceeds to claim that whether one is a relativist in this sense can make no difference to “real life.” And he claims this because he subscribes to the very *general* view that *no* philosophical conclusion travels outside the seminar room:

philosophy is not the name of, or the site of thought, generally; it is a special insular form of thought and its propositions have weight and value only in the precincts of its game.

In short, the conclusions reached in philosophical disquisitions do not travel....The fact that you might give one set of answers rather than another to standard philosophical questions will say nothing about how you will behave when something other than a point of philosophy is in dispute.

To think otherwise, says Fish, is to commit “the theory mistake, the mistake of thinking that your philosophical convictions (if you have them; most people don’t) translate directly or even indirectly into the way you will act when you are not in a seminar.” And he says that I “veer towards” making that mistake when I remark that someone who gives up on absolute moral facts will produce a world “without any normative vocabulary.”

What Fish is alluding to here is my claim that there is an entailment from “there are only relative facts about morality” to “there is nothing for moral vocabulary to be about.” He doesn’t dispute the validity of the entailment. He thinks that if one made that claim in a philosophy seminar room it would be correct. But he says it doesn’t follow that an ordinary person will behave nihilistically – that is, eschew all use of normative vocabulary – just because he believes that entailment to hold in the seminar room. (Note that, at this point, Fish must have decided to go along with *my* definition of moral relativism rather than his, because there is clearly no entailment from “there is no algorithmic trump card in morality” to “there is nothing for normative vocabulary to be about.”)

Now, I hope it’s clear that neither Fish nor I are in the business of making empirical claims about what people will *actually* do. Prediction of actual behavior is a matter best left to sociologists and psychologists.

When I say that there is an entailment from relativism to nihilism, I’m not making a claim about what someone who is a relativist *will* believe or do. I am only making a claim about what it would be *consistent* for him to believe or do. I am claiming that it would be inconsistent for someone to continue to make moral evaluations, if he also maintains that they can only be valid relative to particular moral codes.

In response to this, I can imagine someone trying to dispute the entailment. What I can’t understand is what Fish does, which is to concede the entailment, but claim that it doesn’t matter.

It’s possible that Fish was misled here by his concentration on his own bland version of moral relativism, the “no algorithmic trump cards thesis.” For, although that version is not empty of all practical implications, its blandness prevents it from assuming any great significance.

But if we switch to considering the thesis that most people mean by “moral relativism,” namely, that there are only relative, but no absolute, facts about morality, then it is very clear that there will be no way to insulate it from practical concerns. In his comment #93 on Fish’s piece, David Velleman puts the point well:

Fish’s examples of “real life” are not the ones to which relativism would matter. Consider instead how we (Westerners) deal with cultures that practice female genital mutilation. We could say, “Well, what’s right for us isn’t necessarily right for them, and it’s meaningless to ask which of us is ‘really’ right.” Or we

could say, "If we're right (as we think) then they must be wrong, and we should try to convince them." Or we can say, "Both of us are right in the context of our own cultures, but some cultures are superior to others." And so on. In the first case, we don't even try to talk to them. In the second case, we try to engage them in moral argument. In the third case, we expose them to our way of life and count on them to change. These are real-life alternatives, and in today's world, the choice among them matters a great deal.

It is rationally inconceivable that one's meta-ethical attitudes about moral correctness and truth won't influence one's first-order views about how to deal with cultures that practice female genital mutilation. Indeed, it is precisely because they were expected to have such influence – because they were expected to foster greater tolerance for those with whom one might disagree – that people were attracted to moral relativism in the first place.