Ethical Reasoning

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Experimental philosophers and sociologists have become interested in the way in which people attempt to reason about ethical choices. Some of their studies have found that people, and especially Americans, think about ethical choices from a relativistic framework. Such people are called ethical relativists. In short, ethical relativists believe that ethical standards are a matter of personal opinion or taste. So, for example, when one says that it is wrong to cheat or lie, one is simply expressing their opinion with respect to cheating or lying in a particular context.

But ethical relativism is a problematic position. For one, if ethical relativism is true, we are in no position to say that an action performed by others is wrong; after all, if ethical standards are a matter of personal opinion, then it is only one’s opinion that some action is wrong. This has far reaching consequences. It follows that, if we truly are ethical relativists, then we cannot condemn actions that many believe to be obviously wrong—e.g., the senseless and unjustified torture of another person, rape, etc. For, as relativists, our condemnations are only our personal opinions; and, the torturer and rapist also have opinions on whether these actions are wrong. If relativism is true, each opinion is as good as any other.

Fortunately, most people that assert ethical relativism in haste aren’t really ethical relativists. Most have deeply held ethical intuitions that are counter to ethical relativism. For example, most people do believe that senseless and unjustified torture is wrong for reasons that go beyond their own tastes and opinions: most plausibly, the action is wrong because senseless torture unnecessarily violates the preferences of the person being tortured.

Once we discover that ethical relativism is inconsistent with our deeply held ethical intuitions, we are presented with a choice: either we abandon ethical relativism and choose to act in a way that is consistent with the consequences of our deeply held ethical intuitions, or, we choose to accept that, at times, we are inconsistent.

The latter action—accepting that we are inconsistent—can have disastrous consequences. To see this, suppose that we believe some contradiction—for example, that, ‘it is permissible to torture and it is not permissible to torture’. Then, we must believe that, ‘it is permissible to torture or the moon is made of green cheese’. Why must we believe this claim? Well, an ‘or’ statement is true if at least one of the disjuncts (i.e., ‘it is permissible to torture’, and ‘the moon is made of green cheese’) is true. If we assert the first disjunct as true, as we did above, then the ‘or’ statement must be true. But, since we also believe that ‘torture is not permissible,’ we can (validly!) deduce that ‘the moon is made of green cheese.’
So, starting from an inconsistency (a contradiction), we are logical forced to believe anything. The consequences of this are disastrous: if we are inconsistent, and thus, hold contradictory beliefs, then we are susceptible to believe anything whatsoever—e.g., that ‘the moon is made of green cheese’ or, worse, that ‘life is not worth living’. This fact is reason enough for us to try hard not to hold contradictory beliefs. Thus, if we have deeply held ethical intuitions about torture, murder, etc., we are better off if we abandon relativism and consider the logical consequences of those intuitions.