

about heterosexist humor: "The individual as distinctive is erased, dissolved into a prejudged type which determines in society's eyes all of his or her significant characteristics. The jokes... presume that a gay person is nothing but his sexual orientation and its efflorescences." The woman expected to laugh at a sexist joke, packaged as a joke about herself, wants to protest, "But this isn't a joke about *me*." Even this reaction is parodied in the joke where the husband says to the wife, "Women always take everything so personally," and the wife replies indignantly, "I don't."

How are we to react, then, when a racial or ethnic joke is told by a member of that race or ethnic group? How can racist or ethnic jokes be so terrible if individuals are willing to tell these on themselves? Ethnic jokes are told on oneself in a variety of contexts. Sometimes one plugs one's own ethnic group into an all-purpose ethnic joke to be able to "get away with" telling it, without giving offense. In such cases the joke itself appeals to no distinctive stereotype of the group chosen—it satirizes, say, garden-variety stupidity—and so the punchline carries no sting. Occasionally ethnic jokes told by ethnic-group members may provide genuine examples of affectionate self-directed humor, where the joke teasingly plays on some ethnic trait the group itself recognizes, half-affectionately, half-ruefully, as its own. But too often self-told ethnic jokes show only self-directed ethnic hatred. Boskin points to cases in which blacks themselves have adopted the Sambo

stereotype as self-image: "Entrapped within the illusion, the stereotyped person runs the risk of succumbing to it." That a negative stereotype, repeated and reinforced in countless ethnic jokes, can become so culturally dominant that members of the despised group at last come to internalize it is one of the most egregious wrongs that such jokes perpetrate.

Conclusion

Returning now to Mr. Butz and Mr. Watt, exiled from public service for jokes that took only a moment in the telling: did their punishment fit or exceed their crime? If racist and sexist jokes are evidence of a racist and sexist character, cause pain and harm to blacks and women, and insult and affront the dignity of blacks and women as individuals, it would seem that public administration can do without the services of those who cannot refrain from telling them.

—Claudia Mills

The sources quoted in this article are: Ronald de Sousa, "When Is It Wrong to Laugh?" in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, edited by John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); Merrie Bergmann, "How Many Feminists Does It Take to Make a Joke? Sexist Humor and What's Wrong with It," *Hypatia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1986); Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (New York: Bantam Books, 1963); Joseph Boskin, "The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo," in Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*; and Richard Mohr, "Fag-ends and Jokes' Butts," from *Gays and Equal Protection*, unpublished manuscript.

Teaching Philosophy and Public Policy

The Menace of Moral Relativism

Every college teacher whose classes require some discussion of values or morality has a common frustration: students who are moral relativists. Despairing professors want to know how to respond to moral relativism, how to deal with it, how to defeat it.

"Moral relativism" is not just something some of our students believe in. It is now also the fashionable explanation for our cultural distempers. Allan Bloom's new book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, identifies moral relativism as the main culprit behind the decline of American intellectual life. President Reagan and Education Secretary Bennett likewise see our social problems stemming from a baneful relativism and values-neutrality in our schools. Relativism is the legacy of 1960s liberalism, of the abandonment of standards, of bad educational theories, of intellectual loss of nerve, of secular humanism: these and other sources are offered as explanations for the current reign of relativism.

In the following comments, I want to suggest several

theses, for which I can offer no more support than twenty years' experience of trying to teach philosophy to a broad range of college students. The first thesis is that our students' relativism isn't an artifact of the 1960s or 1970s and not the product of "values clarification" and other bad educational theories in our schools. (Not that there aren't bad educational theories in our schools.) The second thesis is that our students' relativism is an irritant to us but not a menace to society. This is because they aren't really relativists and their moral instincts are generally sound.

Students didn't first become relativists in the 60s and 70s. (In fact, most of mine became Maoists and Moonies; and in the 80s they became Christians and Republicans.) Relativist students abounded in the 50s and before, and their proportion probably remains more or less constant over time, not many more now, proportionately, than forty years ago. The reason this is so is because relativism grows out of the common

experience of students, not out of the changing winds of cultural fashion, political ideology, or educational theory. This is my third and main thesis and the one I want to develop at some length.

Relativism as a Theory

Students are attracted to relativism because it seems to them a cogent account of their moral experience. It expresses certain of their moral intuitions or feelings. As children, they first encounter morality in the form of authoritative rules. Parents, teachers, and other adults tell them what to do and punish them for

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failures. As children grow older they begin to question the rules they must go by and be alienated by some of the rules-enforcement they encounter. When pressed by children to justify their rules and punishment, parents and teachers often become uncomfortable, react defensively, and fall back on sheer authority. Moreover, they often use their authority in ways that strike young people as unfair and inequitable. Adults in authority respond in uptight, rigid, and insensitive ways to rule infractions and resort to petty and mean-spirited discipline.

So young people—not all of them, of course—become suspicious of authority and rules. They have moral responses to instances of authority abused or insensitively used—they sense something detestable about such instances—but they don't know how to frame those moral feelings in words. After all, if morality is identified with rules and authority, then the terms of morality itself constrain the criticism of rules and authority. Not unnaturally, many students seize upon a different vocabulary: relativism. It is by means of this vocabulary that they express central moral responses to authority and rules.

The vocabulary—not in any sense a coherent and systematic language—offers a number of protective devices. "Who's to say?" the student asks, deflating your carefully crafted argument about a moral issue and leaving you wondering what to do next. "That's just your opinion," responds another, reducing argument to autobiography and making you wish you had a loaded gun. "It's wrong to condemn other people," admonishes yet another student, condemning your condemning other people. "If it's right for him, it's right," offers a fourth, unlimbering the concept philosophers dread most: right-for-him.

As much as these protective devices may shorten the lives of philosophy teachers, they do not betoken insensitivity in the students but insight. "Who's to say?" and

"That's just your opinion" are clumsy ways of rejecting the idea that moral judgments derive their validity just from their being said by authorities. "It's wrong to condemn others" is a reaction against the bullying tactics of judgmentalism, incautiously directed at judgment in general. "If it's right for him, it's right" is a recognition of the plurality of the good (although misleadingly framed in terms of the right.)

The more clever and articulate student may subsume these various devices under a more general proposition. "Morality is relative," he says, or, "You can't judge another (person, group, country) except by his (its) own standards." He may even offer some rudimentary arguments ("Each person is different"; "Every culture has its own ways") or appeal to philosophical precedent: moral relativism, after all, runs through philosophy from Protagoras to Gilbert Harman.

If pushed to explain and defend their relativism, students will produce pretty feeble and incoherent accounts, accounts that any second-year philosophy graduate student ought to be able to demolish with both hands tied behind her back. It is inevitable, of course, that the students' accounts will be incoherent. They are trying to express certain attitudes or judgments *within* morality (be tolerant, live and let live, do your own thing) by making claims *about* morality (there are no universal standards, each person has his own opinion). But denying that there are any universal moral truths is not a particularly felicitous way to recommend to others the truth of "Do your own thing," or "Respect differences in others," or "Don't be judgmental."

Teaching Against Relativism

It is a funny thing, though: all those clever demolitions we do on relativism don't move our students very much. We can exhibit inconsistencies by the bushel and absurdities by the barrel, and it makes little dent. This

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is because we usually attack relativism head on, and such a direct attack is likely to fail for reasons that are implicit in the account I've just given. Students are not dissuaded by arguments because they aren't led to relativism by arguments; they are attracted to it because it *explains* their moral experience. It expresses their resistance to authoritarianism, intolerance, and uptightness in general. And, since they see relativism as explaining and justifying tolerance and respect, they think that to give up the first is to abandon support for the second. Show all the inconsistencies in relativism you want; the students will just mark it down

to your cleverness and wordsmithery, because they *know* tolerance and respect are right. As long as students' relativism is an expression of their skepticism about rules and authority, they will not give it up no matter how badly it fares under logical attack.

Thus, any successful attack on relativism must first prepare the way by detaching the connection between relativism and tolerance. There are two strategies available to the teacher, one visible, the other invisible. The first is used in the context of talking about relativism as a philosophical position: instead of arguing against it, you proceed through a diagnosis similar to the one I've given above, showing the student that he uses relativism to express certain moral attitudes and that he doesn't need relativism for this purpose. In fact, using relativism *undermines* the serious expression of these attitudes.

This strategy may be effective if worked at carefully, but it may face problems. One is this: you are an authority figure, too, so you have, in the students' minds, a vested interest in defending authority (and rules). Consequently, even if they follow your diagnoses and your arguments they may still hold on to their relativism. After all, it has worked for them satisfactorily (they think) up to this point, so why give it up for a philosophical pig in the poke?

Thus, the second, invisible strategy may fare better. On this strategy, you try to keep the issue of relativism, and any of its manifestations, from ever arising in the first place. You don't want to talk about it, or have the students talk about it. So you have to frame moral examples and moral discussions in ways that grip or absorb the students' imaginations *directly*, without calling into play their little arsenal of moral theory. And each example or discussion has to reveal, after some exploration, a vivid distinction. After a while, the students will have a repertoire of many distinctions and discriminations, and this is just what they need to be

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able to put their moral feelings into words that (from their own point of view) are more precise, subtle, powerful, and persuasive. As they become habituated to a new vocabulary, they drop, without being aware of it, the protective devices of relativism they were prone to call on in tight spots. Relativism just melts away, its disappearance unnoticed.

Of course, this second strategy is a slow and long-

range affair. It can't be executed in a couple of class periods, or even in several months of classes. In contrast, the first strategy can be put to work at any time you have a few hours for discussion. However, just because the first strategy is negative, it is not likely to produce permanent results, even when it is effective. Relativism, for the students, is a habit that responds to a need; it is not likely to go away until they acquire a new way of serving the need.

Our relativist students threaten only the peace of mind of their teachers. They were put on earth to torment us and keep us humble.

Relativism—A Menace?

There is a certain sense in which the second strategy works itself out on its own, even if we don't intervene in the students' learning. As they accumulate more moral experience on their own, their powers of moral discrimination will improve. They will come upon useful and clarifying distinctions and find better ways to express their moral feelings than by invoking the protective devices of relativism. Among the most important experiences they will have, of course, is that of becoming authority figures themselves and having to lay down and enforce rules. They will marry, become parents, take jobs with supervisory requirements, embark on large-scale cooperative projects, become involved politically. They will come to have, as a result, more refined and complex views of rules, rule-systems, and authority than they once had. For most of our relativist students, the relativism will go away on its own, like acne, disappearing with age and maturity.

This is because, as I said at the outset, our students never were relativists anyway. Their relativism is largely epiphenomenal; it arises out of their moral experience but doesn't shape their moral responses. It is a way—inadequate and confused, to be sure—of trying to give voice to certain of their moral intuitions, and it is those intuitions that actually govern their moral behavior. Sooner or later, most of them find a more adequate moral language to go with greater experience and more complex intuitions. Is moral relativism a menace to society? It would be if there were any moral relativists, but real ones are hard to find. Our relativist students threaten only the peace of mind of their teachers. They were put on earth to torment us and keep us humble.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

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