



Ethics Bites

Blame and Historic Injustice

David Edmonds

This is *Ethics Bites*, with me David Edmonds.

Nigel Warburton

And me Nigel Warburton.

David

Ethics Bites is a series of interviews on applied ethics, produced in association with The Open University.

Nigel

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David

There are many practices, that today we condemn as ludicrous, barbaric or abhorrent, which in the past were considered by the vast majority to be acceptable. In Ancient Greece slavery was widely regarded as entirely natural. Not many people in the early 18th century believed that women should be entitled to vote. Until very recently, it was thought perfectly ok for school teachers to cane their pupils when they misbehaved. So, given that we're prisoners of our time, should we blame the culprits, the slave owners, the children floggers – after all, they surely couldn't have been expected to know any better? Even though we now do. And does the answer to this blame question have implications for how we should handle alien cultures today – cultures operating by principles or practices to which we might take strong exception. Questions for Miranda Fricker of Birkbeck College.

Nigel

Miranda Fricker, welcome to *Ethics Bites*.

Miranda Fricker

I'm very pleased to be here.

Nigel

The topic we want to talk about today is the relativity of blame. Could you outline what the moral problem is there?

Miranda

Yes. Some people will think that moral blame can apply over any amount of cultural or historical distance. But some philosophers have thought that a certain sort of cultural or historical distance can make moral judgements in general – and I particularly want to focus on judgements of blame – lapse. The core argument here is often put in terms of our moral concepts becoming inapplicable over sufficient historic distance. If you take a classic example like a mediaeval English knight, the knight's code of honour doesn't seem to have any analogue today. So if we look back and see some of the dreadful things he might have done in the name of honour, and we disapprove, it would be absurd, some have argued, moralistic, closed-minded and historically insensitive to just blame him for certain perhaps violent acts he did in the name of honour. The relativist impulse in ethics comes from wanting to respect that historical distance and allow that this knight, although he will have acted in terms of his code of honour in ways which we now disapprove of, should not be blamed, should not even be disapproved of in any way.

Nigel

We don't have to go back all the way to medieval knights. When I was at school, which wasn't all that long ago, we had the cane. It seems to me quite barbarous now, but at the time it was an accepted pedagogic tool.

Miranda

Yes, that's right. And what interests me about moral relativism is that a lot of the argument for it ought to be contained in a thesis about the relativity specifically of blame, but confined to that so that you don't move to any more general moral relativism. Now in this nice example you raise of corporal punishment against children, moral sensibilities have moved on. And we now regard hitting children, smacking children, caning them, depriving them of food, as utterly morally unacceptable and vicious practices which we now bring under quite different moral concepts, not of discipline or proper child management, but rather of child abuse, domestic violence, assault and so on. Now if you have school teachers who used to go in for some of these practices, understanding them as a normal part of disciplining children, we perhaps do look back - and it would be moralistic to think we can stand here and blame them for engaging in these practices when they were thought of as a proper part of a morally good way of treating children at the time. So I think even over a very little cultural and historic distance, we can look back and find judgements of blame do run out. And I think that's explained by the fact that it's really a condition of blame that we have to be able to see people as being in a position to have known better. And if people aren't or weren't in a position to have known better, we can't blame them. But we can regard what they did as morally abhorrent, and I think we ought to be able to say something negative about them, in terms of their character, which falls short of blame. But it's obscure exactly what we can say.

Nigel

So how does that fall short of relativism where you say there are just these compartmentalised different ways that people behave? And we're not in a position to judge at all what somebody did at a different time or in a different culture.

Miranda

Well it will seem to be the same thing as relativism so long as we assume that blame exhausts our negative moral judgements. But I think in our ordinary moral reflection, though we may lack a vocabulary, we have lots of rooms for judgements that fall short of moral blame but which are still judgements directed at the individual agent for what he or she did. And I think we could usefully coin a term that I call historical or moral disappointment to use in respect of people who fail to come to a moral insight that contemporaries of theirs did succeed in making. I need to explain this a little more because I think we need to make a distinction between routine moral judgements, routine moral interpretations if you like, and at the times that we're envisaging where children were standardly beaten as a form of discipline the routine moral moves would have been in terms of did this child deserve such a severe punishment and there might have been a yes or no answer. Those would have been routine moral judgements. But there would have been people around that teacher at a certain point in history where we see a kind of moral transition who were able to make a different sort of move, a more exceptional moral move, as I would call it, to see that 'no wait a minute, this is what you call cruelty'. They were able then to start bringing these activities, these standard practices under different moral concepts and come to see things in a more proper light, and you can see I'm assuming a fairly strong moral realism or moral objectivity about these things. The important point here is that the relativity of blame can fit into a framework not of moral relativism at all, but on the contrary of moral objectivity.

Nigel

So some people are just exceptional and see beyond the limitations of their time.

Miranda

Yes, that's right. I think we have to see collective moral sensibility as growing and progressing and evolving through time. That's to say I don't assume that we're heading closer and closer to a kind of perfect moral vision. But in a particular case I think we can look back and see that we've made moral progress about certain sorts of subject areas, and the punishment of children seems to be one of them. So if we regard morality as this rolling, self correcting,

organic, enterprise in sensitivity to others and to moral realities of various sorts, we might expect that some people are pushing that process ahead while others are lagging behind. So when we look at historical change, while we may acknowledge that very often, there's a certain sort of structural luck in what makes attitudes change, very often for instance after a war you find that certain sorts of attitudes are relaxed and so on, but we also expect to see that certain people's reflective capacities are also forcing change. People are lobbying for different attitudes and that means that at any given time of social transition there will be some people who for whatever reason are able to come to see smacking children as a form of violence instead of just as a form of appropriate discipline. And they're the people who move the moral discipline on. And they're the people who make judgements I'm calling exceptional judgements, by contrast with the merely routine judgements of the others who are carrying on judging in the old ways.

Nigel

Now you've talked about disappointment as the appropriate attitude towards some people's behaviour and feelings in the past. How does that differ from regret?

Miranda

Regret taken absolutely generally needn't be a moral attitude at all. The bank robber can regret that he left his fingerprints all over the safe. And one can regret that one missed the bus. None of these are moral attitudes. But forms of moral regret can be differently focused. There can be shame, which I take is basically a desire to hide from disapproving eyes, which might be others eyes or indeed, internalised, it might be one's own. There's guilt which is normally associated with a heavy conscience which you might be able to offload through some process of atonement or confession or so on, and remorse perhaps the most important of all, which is characterised fundamentally with a sympathetic grasp of the wrong one has done – a pained awareness of the pain one has caused. Now, those different forms of moral regret are essentially self-focused. It's significant that it's me that did it. And that's why I'm feeling the regret, the remorse, the guilt, the shame that I'm feeling. Moral disappointment probably could be just about projected towards oneself. But basically it can't. Basically it's an attitude we have towards other agents, and it's a kind of disapproval we have towards them for a failure to bring their practices or certain practices under a concept that they could have even in their time brought it under, because other people were just beginning to manage this moral insight.

Nigel

So far we've just been talking about historical distance. But actually geographically there are presumably tribes which haven't yet encountered people from technologically sophisticated societies who have practices we might find morally abhorrent. Let's imagine there is such a tribe and they standardly kill their third child in a cruel way. How should we treat them because they're contemporaneous with us, there's no distance of time, so should we just feel disappointed with them, or should we prosecute when we discover them?

Miranda

Well some of the general arguments for moral relativism look for very grand kinds of culture difference to discover that our moral values in general simply don't apply. But very few of the people who would argue for relativism generally in that way would say it applies over cultural distance. But I think that, actually, if we've narrowed it down simply to judgements of blame that we're relativizing, I think actually judgements of blame run out pretty quickly. We've suggested already that they run out pretty quickly over historical distance, and the condition that's governing whether or not judgements of blame apply is the question whether the agent in question is in a position to have thought differently, to have known better, if you like. And I think that condition applies over cultural distance. So if we look at a distant culture and we judge some practice that they do in that culture negatively. We must ask ourselves whether or not they're in a position to think differently, to know differently, to know better, as we might put it from our own point of view, and if they are, we may blame, but if they're not, then we'll find that blame seems moralistic and absurd.

Nigel

Can you imagine anything that we do now or that you do now that in 20 years time people we'll look back at and feel deeply disappointed in?

Miranda

Quite possibly. Yes. And I suppose this is an example of how one could almost, in advance of oneself, be disappointed in one's current practices as it were. I eat meat but only in semi good conscience. And I sometimes imagine if we were heading towards a more fully vegetarian future, those future others would look back on people like me with some moral disapproval. They would look at my attitudes towards pets and so on and wonder why on earth I didn't manage to bring my treatment of other sorts of animals under the same concept that I use for pets. And they would see incoherence in my thinking and all the sorts of things that we look back on other peoples' attitudes towards beating children say and wonder why they didn't manage to see the light. I don't know that that's what future generations are going to think but I can see that it might be. And if so, clearly someone like me is in a position to be thinking differently to be making more exceptional moral moves than I now do, for I am surrounded by vegetarians who have indeed made that sort of exceptional moral move in their ethical thinking. But I haven't, and I remain in a grey area. Now I think that the worst judgement to be made of someone like me would be historical moral disappointment. Disappointment in my failing to make that more exceptional moral move in my thinking. But eating meat is sufficiently normal, sufficiently routine around here, that I would not in fact be regarded as blameworthy. So I think I'm probably situated in this moral grey area that I'm naming moral disappointment.

Nigel

Miranda Fricker, thank you very much.

Miranda

Thank you.

David

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