

Review: Morality: An Introduction to Ethics by Bernard Williams

Here are some perspectives on Bernard Williams popular little book *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*. The book is an outstanding introduction to this subject and is wholly incisive and interesting. I love his blistering attack on the absurdity of moral relativism.

Let us explore some of its gems.

Morality is just about feelings or it is not. If you mean you feel something is wrong but are not saying it simply is wrong then that is subjective morality.

When it comes to subjective morality, the study of morality, moral philosophy, boils down to an examination of three things:

- 1 What you consider right/wrong is just your opinion for there is no way to prove anything is fully or absolutely wrong
- 2 Right and wrong judgements are just you not talking about right and wrong as such but what you want them to be
- 3 There is no factual basis for any moral standard or moral rule. Morals are not facts - facts are things like temperatures and so on - anything that testing and science can show to be true.

Some subjectivist people take their moral mores very seriously. A relativist can never do that unless there is something else they are after - eg relativist politicians just looking for votes. A person who defends unborn life for she feels she wants to protect life will be more stable than one who thinks its just a matter of opinion. The moral subjectivist does not care if her feelings are morally justified - she just cares and that is it.

I ask can a subjectivist object to God on the basis that she or he feels there should be no suffering? Clearly yes. If subjectivism is usually and normally good then God is bad doctrine and God should be opposed not loved.

Relativism tends to think a culture can define its own morality as long as it is functional. A relativist would not agree with a culture killing itself just for sport. So relativists say you can concoct morality and then contradict themselves by saying there is a moral rule that cannot be negotiated! The society or culture must remain functional.

Morality is essentially about change - it is looking out at the world. That is why it is about how you act, how you make decisions and about you taking responsibility. It involves assessing what is wrong and going out to fix it as far as possible. So if you have the wrong idea about what makes moral moral you are going to work for the wrong changes. A bad moral system is as much about change as a good one. Relativists make new relativists and soon one relativist is trying to destroy the other.

Believers may say they get morality only from God but they must decide what is good and fair first before they can even hope to see God in such terms. God not existing or God existing makes no difference at all to how valid or important morality is. To fail to see that and to worship God and stress him above all is then actually immoral. We want and need ethics/morality to be correct and true because it is the nature of ethics/morality to be true.

Some who say there are no objective moral standards say there is no need for them or to worry about them. What do they mean and is it true? Even relativists and moral subjectivists will not encourage serial killing! But that does not mean that objective morality and accepting it is not that important. It means that relativists and subjectivists cannot get way from its binding authority and end up serving objective morality in spite of themselves. It means objective morality is more important than ever.

Religion always blames how difficult morality is and how it can be confusing for the failures of its members and leaders. Bernard Williams however says that the blame arises from "religion's being incurably unintelligible." We have just seen that the insistence on God as necessary for morality is an example, indeed the chief and most relevant example, of that. To avoid any explicit or implicit blame, it is vital that people honestly evaluate their religion and maybe walk away. Blaming the standards of morality for failures of the people in the religion is a sign of not genuinely esteeming religion.

Believers in religion have used their Gods to justify their own good and bad behaviour. They even uses their Gods to justify the Gods own good and bad behaviour as well! That is truly shocking. Seeing that human nature likes excuses for itself what does that say about the excuses for God or Gods? It is very rich coming from a species like us!

Is good simply whatever makes you healthier and stronger and better off? Many say no for it makes sense to ask, "Is it really virtuous of you to look after your health, relationships etc." G.E.Moore said that there is no way something non-moral (eg health) can be made equal with morality - love and justice say. Is it fair for example that a murderer should get the gift of a good knife? Anything that treats wellbeing as the only good is fraught with problems or so it would seem. The issue is that wellbeing depends on the circumstances - what if it turned out that the world would be better off just having beetles on it and we were all ate alive?

Morality if it needs us to justify it is going to be under suspicion. Morality has an unwritten moral rule, "I am the rule speaking and it is fair and good and loving to let me show why I am right". So a workable sane morality has to justify itself. 1 and 1 being 2 has nothing to do with people preaching it as true. It is just true.

Utilitarianism is said to say that if a doctor steals your organs that will have bad results for nobody will trust medicine. But what if this were a once off? And surely in a sense every incidence of that kind is a once off in its own way? No two circumstances in two similar events are always exactly the same. And we know how persistent trust can be in the face of much to mistrust.

To say it is objectively bad to destroy trust as this theory of Utilitarianism does, an assumption underlying the vast majority of its thoughts and contributions, worries about the trust and the organs are barely considered!

My last word on all that is that Williams can lead you to a process of elimination that brings you to real objective morality. And that is fine. But it means that morality has to be about criticism and self-criticism.