

Moral Judgments of Foreign Cultures and Bygone Epochs

A Two Tier Approach

(“Andere Länder, andere Sitten”)

Overview

1. Exposition of the Problem
2. Judgments of the Context (Historical Period or Culture) itself
3. Judgments of People's *Actions within* the Context
4. Objections and Refinements

1. The Question

How can we form sound moral judgments about something that happens outside our own historio-cultural context?

Two facets:

1. Moral judgments of historical events
2. Moral judgments across cultural or subcultural boundaries

Ruling out the extremes

- Moral **Relativism**: Judging only according to the standards of the respective context
- Moral **Absolutism**: Judging always according to one's own moral convictions

Breaking up the question

1. Judgments of the context itself,

that is:

moral judgments of norms, customs,
standards of behavior and valuation,
established procedures etc.

in a given historio-cultural context

2. Judgments of people's actions within this
context

2. Judging the Context (Tier 1)

Moral Judgments about other cultures (or about bygone historical epochs):

- are legitimate
- cannot be avoided if important matters (human right issues) are at stake
- can (only) be made on the basis of one's own set of values, that is:
 - the greatest common subset of values does not provide a sufficient basis
 - they cannot be made on the basis of the values of the context that is judged itself

Limitations

- limited “objective possibilities” (M.Weber)
 - limits of importance
 - remoteness (of time, space, concern; in connection with importance)
- possible misunderstandings of other contexts must be taken into account

3. Judging what happens within the Context (Tier 2)

- Basis of moral judgments: The *moral common sense* of the respective context (where context is: epoch, culture and, with qualifications, subculture but no smaller contexts)
- Moral common sense comprises only rules that are long term stable
- Ruled out: Short term or merely residual morals, such as occur in strong fanaticism, genocide, other outbursts of violence etc.

Problems of the moral common sense criteria

1. Ambiguity: Continuous change of morals, conflicts of several common sense morals
2. Conservatism: Progressive morals stand always against the moral common sense
3. Insufficiency: Atavisms and superstitions as an unquestioned part of the moral common sense can not be condemned

(Possible) Solutions

- 1.If several morals are in conflict, the one that is best according to one's own set of values should be picked.
(This assumes that there exists a *justified demand for a certain amount of moral self reflection*)
- 2.Extend the criteria to include progressive morals (and accept tragical situations)
- 3.Atavisms are better countered by education than by moral protest
(A good point for the two tiered approach)

4. Objections and Refinement

Objections:

1. *Inconsistency*: An action may be wrong (tier 1), but the person performing it cannot be criticized (tier 2)
3. *Hypocrisy*: The contempt for a culture cannot honestly be combined with respect for its members
4. *Arrogance*: The assumption that one's own set of values is the right one is most obviously biased

Answers

The two tiered approach is about forming a moral opinion not about, not about policy. When transferred to policy making the two tiers can be condensed in different ways in different situations. Examples:

- Law making: There can be only one law in one country (*moral absolutism*)
- Intercultural Dialogue: Requires a “*willing relativism of dialogue*”