

Does Philosophy Matter?

BY STANLEY FISH AUGUST 1, 2011

In a recent essay about moral relativism in *The Times's* philosophy series *The Stone*, Paul Boghossian cites a 2001 op-ed of mine as an example of the contradictions relativists fall into. At one moment, he says, I declare the unavailability of “independent standards” for deciding between rival accounts of a matter, and in the next moment I am offering counsel that is “perfectly consistent with the endorsement of moral absolutes.” I don’t regard that as a contradiction, and I would say that to think of it as one is to fail to distinguish between relativism as a philosophical position — respectable, if controversial — and relativism as a way of life, something no one recommends and no one practices.

Believing or disbelieving in moral absolutes is a philosophical position, not a recipe for living.

Boghossian defines relativism (and I’ll go along with his definition for the purposes of this column) as the denial of moral absolutes. But the definition is insufficiently nuanced because there are (at least) two ways of denying moral absolutes. You can say “I don’t believe there are any” or you can say “I believe there are moral absolutes, but (a) there are too many candidates for membership in that category and (b) there is no device, mechanical test, algorithm or knock-down argument for determining which candidates are the true ones.”

The person (and I am one) who takes this second position denies nothing except the possibility (short of force or torture and they don’t count) of securing universal assent. You might say that he or she is a moral absolutist but an epistemological relativist —someone who doesn’t think that there is a trump-card that, when played, will bring your interlocutor over to your side, but does think that there are any number of cards (propositions, appeals, examples, etc.) that might, in particular circumstances and given the history and interests of those in the conversation, produce a change of mind.

But does any of this matter outside the esoteric arena of philosophical disputation? Let’s suppose that either of two acts of persuasion has occurred in that arena: a former moral absolutist is now a relativist of some kind, or a former relativist is now a confirmed believer in moral absolutes. What exactly will have changed when one set of philosophical views has been swapped for another? Almost nothing. To be sure you will now give different answers than you once would have when you are asked about moral facts, objective truths, irrefutable evidence and so on; but when you are engaged in trying to decide what is the right thing to do in a particular situation, none of the answers you might give to these deep questions will have any bearing on your decision. You won’t say, “Because I believe in moral absolutes, I’ll take this new job or divorce my husband or vote for the Democrat.” Nor will you say, “Because I deny moral absolutes I have no basis for deciding since any decision I make is as good or bad as any other.” What you will say, if only to yourself, is “Given what is at stake, and the likely outcomes of taking this or that action, I think I’ll do this.” Neither “I believe in moral absolutes” nor “I don’t” will be a reason in the course of ordinary, non-philosophical, deliberation.

Now it could be said (and some philosophers will say it) that the person who deliberates without self-conscious recourse to deep philosophical views is nevertheless relying on or resting in such views even though he is not aware of doing so. To say this is to assert that doing philosophy is an activity that underlies our thinking at every point, and to imply that if we want to think clearly about anything we should either become philosophers or sit at the feet of philosophers. But philosophy is not the name of, or the site of, thought generally; it is a special, insular form of thought and its propositions have weight and value only in the precincts of its game. Points are awarded in that game to the player who has the best argument going (“best” is a disciplinary judgment) for moral relativism or its opposite or some other position considered “major.” When it’s not the game of philosophy that is being played, but some other — energy policy, trade policy, debt reduction, military strategy, domestic life — grand philosophical theses like “there are no moral absolutes” or “yes there are” will at best be rhetorical flourishes; they will not be genuine currency or do any decisive work. Believing or disbelieving in moral absolutes is a philosophical position, not a recipe for living.

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In short, the conclusions reached in philosophical disquisitions do not travel. They do not travel into contexts that are not explicitly philosophical (as seminars, academic journals, and conferences are), and they do not even make their way into the non-philosophical lives of those who hold them. The fact that you might give one set of answers rather than another to standard philosophical questions will say nothing about how you will behave when something other than a point of philosophy is in dispute. When Boghossian declares that “Denial of moral absolutism leads not to relativism, but to nihilism,” he could mean one of two things: Either (1) if you deny the existence of moral absolutes, you are committed, as a matter of philosophical logic, to nihilism, or (2) if you deny the existence of moral absolutes, you will behave nihilistically. If he means the first, he is claiming a consequence within the parameters of philosophical debate, and nothing more. If he means the second, he is committing what I call the theory mistake, the mistake of thinking that your philosophical convictions (if you have them; most people don’t) translate directly or even indirectly into the way you will act when you are not in a seminar.

It seems that Boghossian means to say only the first and thus to limit the scope and significance of what he argues to the context of his professional discipline. But he veers toward the second when he remarks that those who “give up on absolute moral facts” will produce a world “without any normative vocabulary.” This would be true, however, only if someone who holds to a philosophical position that gives up on moral absolutes loses the right to say that something is right or wrong. But the ability to make judgments of right and wrong does not depend on your holding a particular belief about morality in general; all that is required are the common sense, on-the-wing criteria you bring to bear (without deep reflection) on everyday situations of choice and decision. There is no additional requirement that you root your decision in a high philosophical abstraction to which you are positively committed.

Boghossian seems to institute that requirement in his last sentence: “[W]hen we are in a muddle about what the answer to a hard moral question is, we are in a muddle about what the absolutely correct answer is.” Why “absolutely”? Isn’t “correct” good enough? (Of course without “absolutely” the assertion is circular; you wouldn’t be looking for the incorrect answer.) “Absolutely” is there to insist that the answer you arrive at and consider correct must be backed up by the conviction that it is underwritten by the structure of Truth and by the universe. This is a demand that makes sense if you are doing philosophy, but if you are doing anything else, it is a demand you can safely, and without contradiction, ignore.
