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MORAL CONSENSUS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Synopsis:

This thesis will discuss theories such as historical relativism: past moral changes are valuable in present day society, radical moral change: morals have been changed radically through generations, moral consensus: when and how does the majority of society agree on morals, and cosmopolitanism: as humans we belong to the single race of humanity, and it is important to empathize, understand, and accept those whom are different from us. I argue that cosmopolitan values will lead to moral progress.

Moral Consensus and Social Change

By: Natasha James

This paper will discuss theories such as historical relativism: the theory that past moral frameworks are valuable in present day society, radical moral change: morals have been changed radically through generations, moral consensus: when and how does the majority of society agree on moral values, and cosmopolitanism: we as humans belong to the single race of humanity over any other race, and it is important to empathize, understand, and accept those who are different from us. This paper highlights analyzing historical relativism and radical moral change within a single society. These are both topics that have not been researched much, which is why this paper is of importance. The Tuskegee syphilis study of 1932 will also be analyzed in order to show how these theories fit in. I argue that radical moral change and a misunderstanding related to historical relativism causes issues within societies; since it allows for morals to radically change and further cause immoral acts against humans. Striving for cosmopolitan ideals will help solve these issues. I will argue that morals should not be dependent on societal consensus. Morals should be our core principles that guide us to be the best possible humans. Since morals are subjected to change so easily and can even lead us to act immorally against others this shows a problem that should be examined. Using the terms above will allow a deep philosophical analysis to understand the roots of why moral values are dependent on social change and moral consensus. I conclude that this problem of moral consensus can be resolved by embracing the idea that we all belong to the human race and by further implementing cosmopolitan ideals.

Morality can be defined as a set of core values that are instantiated in a society or community in order to help discern right from wrong. Morals do not necessarily make us perfect,

but they do help us to avoid harming others.¹ The problem that arises from morality is that it can differ for communities and even for individuals. While there may be a difference in values and morals, they all should have a common thread which is preventing us from harming other individuals. However, this has proven to fall short when looking at history. Aurel Kolani articulates the innate issues that derive from the ideology and subjectivity of morals: “Moral evidence is neither logical or mathematical nor "plainly" factual or empirical. It is ineluctably valuational; and all kinds of valuational evidences, moral and other, suffer from an additional element of "subjectivity" or, in respect of the mode in which the object presents itself, of "opacity”.² Kolani suggests that the lack of factual evidence and logic behind morals makes morals subjective. Due to this subjectivity, morals are prone to change. Around the world and even across nations, there are a multitude of people that have different beliefs, values, and cultures. Differences in morals make it difficult to agree on moral values that everyone holds to be true. While this may be difficult, it can be said the majority of people across the world understand killing for no rational reason is immoral. Concepts such as murder seem to hold some universality. It can be argued that there should be some universal morals that every individual should follow, but there has been no universal conception of what these are. These universal morals could lead to less conflict and resolve issues, but until there is development of what these universals should be, the issue of moral disagreement will persevere.

If there are no universal morals, different communities hold different moral values. It can be necessarily concluded that morals change throughout time in communities as well. Historical

¹ Sapontzis, Steve F. *Subjective Morals*. Lanham, Md: U of America, 2012. Print.R. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

² Kolnai, Aurel. "Moral Consensus." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 70 (1969): 93-118. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.

relativism and social change are the concepts that discuss how moral values fluctuate through time, within communities. Communities across the world are always in flux, in other words, there is always social change taking place. While moral values and fashion trends are not on the same level, a comparison can be drawn in terms of their fluidity in change. What was in last year in fashion is extremely different from what is in fashion this year; at one time we thought body piercings and tattoos were taboo, now we think they are hip and cool. This is the social change we all partake in in our everyday lives and can see happening right in front of us. Across the world we also see social change that is more foreign to us than piercings and fashion. Practices such as Islamic cultures' wearing the veil or female circumcision may oftentimes be radically different and hard to understand. This is because we cannot necessarily understand these practices, since these communities have different institutions that embrace different things than ours do. We oftentimes like to have a buffer between these communities and ours, since we do not understand them and unfortunately do not care to learn and understand them either. It is not of much importance that we philosophically analyze why we change our style. Maybe we do not particularly focus on other communities' social and moral values because they are not of close proximity. But it is of philosophical interest that we do look at our own history. Often times people disregard history, simply because it is history; it is the past. This seems to be an easy way to not take responsibility for our actions, as well as to not analyze why we act the way we do.

History is important; it allows us to understand who we are and what brought us to the position we are in now. Looking back at history, we can see the horrible events that have taken place throughout the world even though they weren't thought of as immoral at the time. In retrospect, these events are an obvious breach of morality. Events such as the Holocaust in

Germany in 1933 or slavery in the United States in 1619 were fundamentally immoral for no rational or logical explanation. The Holocaust was immoral to everyone except most Germans. However, slavery was far more widespread. It was practiced not only in the United States but also in other British colonies/ nations. Racial discrimination has been prevalent in the United States dating back to slavery in 1619, many racially immoral acts have arisen out of this. The Tuskegee experiment of 1932 one of the many racially immoral acts will also be analyzed in detail, in order to further understand social change and historical relativism in relation to a specific case. Most of the time we disregard history, or we like to assume we were not as intelligent at the time. These are most certainly not the right answers since we still partake in immoral acts. In order to truly understand why nations have the capacity to take part in such immoral acts, we must look at human behavior and habits.

Appiah discusses the theory of historical relativism in his book *Cosmopolitanism Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Historical relativism can be defined as the theory that looks at past moral shifts in nations. Appiah believes many of our morals and values depend heavily on the society in which we live in: “And a good deal of what we intuitively take to be right, we take to be right just because it is what we are used to”.³ This quote clearly depicts the issues of historical relativism. If we make decisions of right and wrong based on the communities’ institutions, it leads us to societies filled with followers that are not actualizing their full potential of rationality and logic. Appiah uses the example of spanking to exemplify his point; he says that if one were to be brought up in a home where they were spanked, they would be more likely to spank their kids. This is true of many communities; we tend to hold the same beliefs, culture, and morals of the people we are in closest proximity too. This is because institutions such as education,

³ Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "The Primary of Practice." *Cosmopolitanism Ethics in a World of Strangers*. N.p.: Paw Prints, 2010. 69-86. Print.

government, and religion embrace a standard and suggest this is what we should follow in order to be good citizens.

As we have seen we get our values and morals from what institutions tell us, and as Appiah stated: individuals follow things intuitively rather than actually analyzing or thinking about an issue. It can be concluded that following examples is the root of why there is historical relativism. Let us take slavery; slavery is a concept that is extremely immoral. Though the reason why slavery was practiced so heavily was because, 1) it was embraced by institutions and 2) people seemed to have blindly followed this practice instead of critically thinking⁴. For example, the government or education at the time never had laws against slavery or taught people that slavery was wrong. Instead, they justified it. Only a minority of people actually helped slaves. These were the educated people who thought for themselves and evaluated social changes regardless of what the majority had to say. The majority of the population instead relies on the institutions to tell them what is right or wrong, or what they see most people partaking in. This is the fundamental issue of social norms. Social norms are powerful for a few reasons. It is our nature to fit in with others rather than to stand out. So, if a norm is being widely practiced we are more inclined to follow it rather than go against it, regardless of the morality of it. Another reason why social norms are so compelling is society is often set up so that our institutions guide us and have some sort of authority or higher knowledge. When institutions embrace immoral acts, and suggest they are moral, we are more inclined to follow them due to how we are taught to perceive institutions.

An important question is: when does what the minority thinks become the majority? Researchers at the University of Chicago did a few social experiments in order to

⁴ While I acknowledge, economic reasons played a large role in the motives of slavery; I will not be discussing them since they are not relevant issues concerning this paper.

further understand the moral tipping point. Experimenters discovered, “People apparently need to commit a few bad actions to appear to have substantively changed for the worse, but need to commit many good actions to appear substantively changed for the better.”⁵ The underlying concept here might even work with nations reputations. Looking at history; it is true to this day Germany is most prominently associated with the Holocaust, which took place in the 30’s, rather than any positive act that they have done.

The research also showcased that peoples’ behaviors have an extreme impact on others. It was observed there was the same “tipping point”, when bad behaviors were ceased as well as when they are committed⁶. This suggests that people require equal incentive to change their minds about committing immoral or moral acts. Through this research it is obvious how difficult it is to determine a specific tipping point for when morals change. However, looking at society it appears that moral values change when more and more people follow the actions of another until the majority holds a new belief. Therefore, while there is no definite answer for when that tipping point occurs, it can be deduced that the tipping point is a rather gradual process. It is dependent on a trend of how many people start to embrace an immoral act. When institutions, family, and the majority of our community embrace an immoral act, a tipping point occurs. This is how an immoral act will tip to a moral act in society. For example, racism in the United States was seen to be moral at the time, because the majority believed it was morally acceptable to treat black individuals with no respect. We now consider racism as something immoral due to that overall shift in beliefs.

⁵ Klein, Nadav, Ed O’Brien, and The Tipping Point Of Moral Ch. "The Tipping Point of Moral Change: When Do

⁶ Klein, Nadav, Ed O’Brien, and The Tipping Point Of Moral Ch. "The Tipping Point of Moral Change: When Do

Social change and historical relativism are important to understanding cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is the ideology that all human beings are part of one community; therefore, we have an obligation to understand and empathize with other citizens away from the local area in order to be globally aware, which in turn will make the world a better place. Across the globe there are thousands of cultures that practice and value things that are quite different than what we might practice. Sometimes we even disagree with practices that other cultures embrace. This is the challenge in regards to cosmopolitanism. How do we embrace the different values and morals that are different than our own, even if they go against what we believe? While we do not need to embrace these views, we do need accept them and try to understand them. This in turn will bring us closer to that single community of “humanity”. On another level, moral consensus or social change is important because it hinders cosmopolitanism. If we all have different values and morals that can change easily, and even get us to act immorally to others, then it only makes it harder for us to relate to others who are different. This can also go against the cosmopolitan ideal that we first and foremost belong to the human race. In other words, if we cannot overcome our moral differences to see everyone as equal, we cannot reach a cosmopolitan world.

Throughout this essay it was discussed how morals are always changing in communities and how this is an issue since history has shown we have participated in some extremely immoral acts. We are aware that part of what makes communities across the world so different from us, is their morals. It can be inferred that there are no universal morals. If there are no universal morals we all abide by, it makes it harder to understand people that are strangers to us. While this is true, Appiah believes that, in order to be cosmopolitan, we do not need to come to a consensus about values, we just need to have conversations about them in order to immerse

ourselves with other values and opinions.⁷ While Appiah makes an extremely valid point about cosmopolitanism, it would be certainly far easier to achieve a cosmopolitan world if there were universal morals and values. This is how social change and the lack of moral consensus is related to cosmopolitanism.

Examining the case of the syphilis study in Tuskegee will prove how historical relativism, moral consensus, and radical moral change fit in \and are problematic in reality. In 1932 in Tuskegee, Alabama, an experiment with the false intention of curing syphilis began. The disease spreads over a 3-stage period; if Syphilis is not cured in time it can result in attacks on neurological development, cardiovascular damage, other damage to major organs and bones, and lastly death.⁸ The studies said the aim was to begin treatment programs for Negro males who suffered from Syphilis. There were around 600 men all African Americans who participated, 400 of which were infected and 200 who did not have the disease.⁹ The patients were told they were being cured for "bad blood"; unfortunately the patients could not give their informed consent, since they really had no idea what was happening. In compensation for taking part in the study the patients received free medical exams and meals.¹⁰ While the program was only supposed to last for 6 months, it lasted 40 years.

So, the question is: what was so morally wrong about Tuskegee? By the information presented above it almost seems like this was a step to resolve racism in the early 30's, but in reality, researchers had ulterior motives. It was discovered that the men were not given the right information in order to properly consent, or did not even know the actual reason that the study

⁷ Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "The Primary of Practice." *Cosmopolitanism Ethics in a World of Strangers*. N.p.: Paw Prints, 2010. 69-86. Print.

⁸ Gray, Fred D. *The Tuskegee Syphilis Study: The Real Story and beyond*. Montgomery, AL: NewSouth, 2013. Print.

⁹ Brandt, Allan M. "Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study." *The Hastings Center Report*

¹⁰ Jimenez, Tomas. "Proceedings of the 10th Annual History of Medicine Days, University of

took place. The men were never treated properly for their condition, and even in 1947 when penicillin, a cure to Syphilis, was found treatment was withheld.¹¹ The advisory panel also discovered that the men were not given the choice to leave the study.

This is why Tuskegee is considered an extremely un-ethical event in US history. The fact that medical information was withheld and patients were inadequately cured, even when there was a cure available, is extremely immoral to say the least. While we make this claim now, back in the 1930's we believed otherwise. When the Tuskegee experiment was exposed for what it was, there were mixed reactions from the public. Some claimed it to be outrageous and ethically unjust, while others claimed that there were no legal statutes that required informed consent.¹² Not until the 1960's, thirty years after Tuskegee came to an end, did actual legal statutes on informed consent come into play. After this, there was an overwhelming decision that Tuskegee was an immoral event. It seems that we cannot allow all the blame to be put on the lack of medical ethics in the early 1900's; this may have been seen in an extremely different light if these were white males. That is why the idea of racism has a large underlying role in Tuskegee.

Slavery against African Americans goes back all the way to the 1600's and only legally ended in the late 1800's. Slavery was an extreme result of racism. Though to this day in the 21st Century racism still exists. Unfortunately, Tuskegee caused severe implications on public health services for black individuals even in the 21st Century. It was evaluated that African American individuals tend to not fully trust public health services, after knowing about the history of Tuskegee.¹³ This is important when we try to disregard our history's immoral actions, because

¹¹ Gamble, Vanessa N. "Under the Shadow of Tuskegee: African Americans and HealthCare." *American Journal of Public Health* (1997): n. pag. Web.

¹² Fletcher, John C. "A Case Study in Historical Relativism: The Tuskegee Syphilis Study." *Tuskegee's Truths:*

¹³ Thomas, Stephen B., and Sandra Crouse Quinn. "The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, 1932 to 1972: *Public Health*

the past can still affect people in the present. We must strive to not allow immoral acts like these to take place so that individuals can trust their communities and institutions.

It can also be concluded that the Tuskegee experiment was rooted in America's past ideologies of racism, and seeing black people as "inferior" to white. The case of Tuskegee was depicted in this paper to show how morals can radically change even through communities. The things we believe to be morally unacceptable now were morally acceptable in the past. The next step in this paper will further analyze the concept of racism and social change through America. In order to see how racism is less prevalent we need to understand that discriminating against people merely on their skin color is immoral.

The claim earlier was made in regards to Tuskegee, that historical relativism is important in the present regardless of being of the past. While it may be difficult to look at the immoral events of our own past, it is necessary in order to move forward and to prevent these immoral events happening again. If we do not thoroughly understand what was so immoral about the things that happened in history, there is a good chance that these events could reoccur in the future. We must analyze prior generations actions and understand the breach in morality as logical human beings. John Fletcher discusses the importance of the understanding of past moral changes in his paper "A Case Study in Historical Relativism, *The Tuskegee (PHS) Syphilis Study*". He claims, "The task of transmitting moral evolution also requires accuracy and truthfulness about the history of reform of social practices, which must document the serious moral lapses and errors."¹⁴ Fletcher 's quote emphasizes the need to record history accurately in order to help moral evolution to be effective. From this, it also follows that we must teach history accurately as well. It can be agreed we must record and teach history accurately in order to make

¹⁴ Fletcher, John C. "A Case Study in Historical Relativism: The Tuskegee Syphilis Study." *Tuskegee's Truths:*

sure we do not allow the same immoral lapses to happen again. Another claim can be deduced from this. This claim is that if we are able to understand our history as it was, we may be able to draw on possible signs and enforce preventive measures on other immoral acts that are similar that could arise. These are all important and significant claims that further stress the reason why historical relativism should not be left in the past and is also significant in the present and contributes to our current learning and understanding as we hopefully grow into more moral and just citizens of the world. Some people might wonder what solutions there are for preventing morals to be based on social change. There is not a hard and fast solution on how to overcome this moral disagreement. If morals were not subjected to change, then there would be a clear solution. While there may not be a solution to stop societies from engaging in immoral acts, there are actions that will help people from participating in these acts.

I claim that a proper cosmopolitan education can help resolve this issue. With a proper education that teaches well and the right things, it will allow children at a young age to develop into critical and analytical thinkers. Critical and analytical thinkers seek evidence to support their reasoning, rather than merely believing everything that's told.¹⁵ The cosmopolitan aspect will further enhance these skills as well, and allow children to think globally. With having generations of critical and analytical thinkers that do not follow what institutions say or what others around them do without thinking for themselves first, fewer immoral acts will happen. If we critically analyze the roots of slavery and racism towards black people it comes from the difference in skin color. As any critical and logical human, would understand, this seems to be a mere physical trait that does not conclude that skin color correlates with inferiority. This is also how cosmopolitanism will help. Cosmopolitanism suggests that we empathize and try to

¹⁵ Burbules, Nicholas, and Rupert Berk. "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy." *Critical Theories in Education* (1999): n. pag. Routledge. Web. 29 Apr. 2017.

understand the humans around us, as well as seeing them as equal. Implementing these principles in education will show kids that we really do share the human race, and that we must accept differences and embrace each other.¹⁶ Instead of committing immoral acts against people who seem too different than us, we should try to empathize and understand them. Other aspects of this education include educating children on our real history including the negative aspects.

Historical relativism, as mentioned before, is important for the present. Covering up or downplaying our flaws in history will not help the future generations. We also should not need laws to guide our moral principles and values. Tuskegee was not considered morally unethical at the time to the lack of laws in place, but the act itself, did not need a law to determine its immorality. While laws more often than not are there to guide us to be moral and just citizens, there have been laws that have been in fact immoral. There were once laws that allowed slavery or deprived women with the right to vote, all immoral but nonetheless laws that governed the country as concepts that were taught as “moral”. Teaching children those critical and analytical skills will help this concept of thinking on their own regardless of what is said by institutions. Furthermore, if we properly teach these skills of being critical and analytical, as well as the ideals of cosmopolitanism then we create individuals who are less likely to act immorally, and in turn there will be less radical immoral changes and events that happen throughout the world.

In conclusion, it can be seen how morality is a concept that seems to always be in flux from generation to generation as well as across the world. While we are not in the position to create universal morals, understanding historical relativism and social change are fundamental to society. The Tuskegee experiment of 1932 depicts to us how important it is that we understand these principles. It is important we understand 1) that morals change even though they should

¹⁶ Snauwaert, Dale. "The Ethics and Ontology of Cosmopolitanism: Education for a Shared Humanity." *The Ethics*

not, and 2) our history of immoral acts, in order to prevent future ones from happening. I have demonstrated the importance of analyzing historical relativism, and its importance in regards to moral change within a single society. The ideals of cosmopolitanism and proper education can help societies create individuals that are less likely to take part in immoral acts as well as be more informed and educated individuals in general. Furthermore, this is why overcoming morals based on societal consensus will help us strive for a cosmopolitan world. As the early theologian and philosopher Augustine of Hippo said, "Right is right even if no one is doing it; wrong is wrong even if everyone is doing it."

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