
Is Protagoras' Moral Relativism Unavoidable Today?

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Abstract

Serious problems on crime, environment etc. exist today which can only be addressed successfully on an international scale. This is only possible if humans worldwide share many values of right and wrong. Protagoras (481BC) would have denied this downright. He claimed that the existence of universal valid truths and moral values as well as the capacity to find them is impossible. This view, for not exactly the same reasons, is also prevalent today. For Protagoras and other Sophists who focussed rather on ethics, arête = virtue was a wide concept. They claimed that they could teach a more virtuous life. This in a time when traditional ethical norms for Athenians collapsed: universal norms of good and right, and its religious foundations, were lost. It had no general validity. Nothing was put in its place. Protagoras' sceptical approach was derived from his epistemological approach. In place was individual moral relativism: what is good for me, is good for me. Callicles claimed eventually that right is the right of the strongest. The possibility of foundations was denied (e.g. religious foundations) – about the gods we can say nothing. The foundations are human devices depending on subjective and contingent conditions. Today several value systems, each with its own norms as to good and bad, is well known. We have no quick fix recipes and answers for serious worldwide problems like crime (terrorism, drugs, enslaving of children, etc), animal ethics, environment, cloning, and euthanasia. For the solving of these, worldwide action is logical. But it is hardly possible if common values are absent. To what will we appeal to combat crime like terrorism? Is this possible or shall we have to fall back on Protagoras' dictum of individual moral relativism? The possibility of a common shared foundation for morality had been seriously challenged in ethics. This in the name of antifoundationalism. Like Protagoras, it is denied that there can be absolutely secure insights grounding our moral (and epistemological) knowledge.

Like Protagoras, it is argued that insight is rather based on purely subjective and contingent experience. I also argue that a universal absolute secure foundation for morality is unlikely. However, I argue that a limited common foundation is quite possible. Substratums in an infinite regress (foundationalism) can be avoided. However, the term "foundation" can be used without a foundationalist connotation. I argue for foundations in a limited sense as providing good reasons for accepting a conclusion. This involves a limited basis of universally accepted shared values. These shared values can be known directly by any rational being.

Apart from differences there are striking similarities between 5th century Greece and 21st century Western world. The relative more open attitude of democracy, not only led to critical thinking and science and philosophy, but also had a negative impact on religious values. Belief in the gods was almost everywhere discredited. WT Stace (107) attributes this to the worthlessness of the religion of the time: "Any action, however scandalous or disgraceful, could be justified by the examples of the gods themselves as related by the poets and mythologers of Greece. But, in greater measure, the collapse of religion was due to that advance of science and philosophy which we have been considering in these lectures". Like today the findings of science in eg. evolution, cosmology, neuro science, and a general more critical approach led to highly critical and even sceptical views on religion. So it was in these times in Greece. "The universal tendency of that philosophy was to find natural causes for what had been hitherto been ascribed to the action of the divine powers, and this could not but have an undermining effect upon popular belief. Nearly all the philosophers had been secretly, and many of them openly, antagonistic to the people's religion... No educated man any longer believed in divination, auguries, and miracles.. The age became one of negative, critical, and destructive thought. Democracy had undermined the old aristocratic institutions of the State. And science had undermined religious orthodoxy. With the downfall of these two pillars of things established, all else went too. All morality, all custom, all authority, all tradition, were criticized and rejected. Every restraint of custom, law, or morality, was resented as unwarranted restriction upon the natural impulses of man" (Stace:108).

It is against this background that Protagoras and other Sophists flourished. They were teachers of virtue, but virtue in a much broader sense than only morality (Stace:110). Protagoras of Abdera (480 BC-411) in conjunction with what we have said above, is said to have claimed: "As for the gods, I am unable to say whether they exist or whether they do not exist".

His book *περι θεῶν* involved him in a prosecution of blasphemy. Protagoras' relativism is explicit in his famous dictum "*Man is the measure of all things; of what is that it is; of what is not that it is not*". Protagoras denies and confuses the distinction between sense and thought: whereas other Greek non-Sophist philosophers would argue that my senses are personal, private, peculiar to myself and cannot be imparted to other people; that they bind no one to myself; reason I share with other rational beings, it is a law not only for me, but for all others; it is one and the same reason in me and other humans (Stace:114). Protagoras denies this: as measure of all things, the individual human being is the standard of what is true to himself. There is not truth except the sensations and impressions of each man. What seems true to me is true for me. What seems true to you is true to you (Stace:114,115). Protagoras transfers the problem of knowledge from the object to the subject (Zeller:81). We can see this in the critical attitude as to the Sophist's view that it is not necessary to have any knowledge of a subject to give satisfactory replies as against it – another Sophist, Gorgias ostentatiously undertook to answer any question on any subject instantly and without consideration (Stace:111). This shift from the object to subject is quite evident in all varieties of contemporary relativism.

Against this we may argue that the truth will not conform to our impressions, eg if my impression is that the earth is flat. Protagoras says no – there is no objective truth, no truth independent of the subject. There is no objective truth or moral good. So if I think the Earth is round and you think it is flat, it follows that two contradictory impressions must both be true. Protagoras did not flinch from this conclusion (Stace 115,116). All opinions are true, error is impossible, and that whatever proposition is put forward it is always possible to oppose to it a contradictory proposition with equally good arguments and with equal truth (Stace 116). These "opinions" for Protagoras would also include ethical views, influenced by Heracleitos' philosophy that all permanence is an illusion. Everything is in perpetual flowing; all things flow. What is at this moment is, and the next moment is not. Therefore as we shall soon see, Protagoras can claim as he does that if a society changes, so will the validity of its moral norms.

Protagoras' philosophy amounts to a declaration that knowledge is impossible. Something of this is clearly reflected in Richard Rorty's philosophy that epistemology is to be phased out. In its place "knowledge" becomes acceptable as something rather moral, namely ethical solidarity with the particular community. The subject (community of scientists) and not the object decides by consensus what is acceptable: "They view truth as... what is *good* for us to believe. So they do not need an account of a relation between beliefs and objects called 'correspondence'... This necessarily ethnocentric answer simply says that we must work by our own lights ..My

rejection of the traditional notions of rationality can be summed up by saying that the only sense in which science is exemplary is that it is a model of human solidarity" (Rorty: 22,38,39).

However we indicated that Protagoras' relativism is an individualist relativism. This is fairly generally accepted. But is this so? Not necessarily. He gives the impression that he was already thinking in the line of a more conventionalist cultural relativism as well. Zeller (82) claims that "There can be little doubt that Protagoras regards all morals and laws as only relatively valid, *that is binding only on the human community that which formulated them* and only so long as that community holds them to be good. There is no absolute religion, no absolute morality and no absolute justice" (own italics). From this follows a more moderate approach to crime. He said that punishment is indeed necessary, but must be admitted only as a means of improvement and a deterrent and rejected the idea of vengeance (Zeller:83).

Today several ethical value systems, many cultural contexts, each with its own norms as to good and bad, do not only exist, but are more in quantity and more explicit in expression. Serious problems on crime, environment etc. exist today which can be effectively addressed successfully only on an international scale. This is only possible if humans worldwide share many values of right and wrong. Protagoras would have denied this downright. He would argue that there is no such common basis for agreement. Today we have no quick fix recipes and answers for serious worldwide problems like crime, terrorism, drugs, enslaving of children, etc. The same applies to issues which are not necessarily crime related, like animal ethics, environmental issues, cloning, euthanasia. Most religious scripts of major religions (which seems to be more enduring than the Greek religion referred to of Protagoras' time), are millennia old. They all have moral codes, but they do not make any pronouncements on many a number of contemporary issues like cloning, artificial intelligence, euthanasia or abortion.

As said for the solving of these, worldwide action is necessary. But it is hardly possible if common moral values are absent. To what will we appeal to combat crime like terrorism? According to Protagoras there is no such an appeal possible. Shall we follow Protagoras here that it is not possible, and so fall back on Protagoras' dictum of individual moral relativism or ethical nihilism?

The possibility of a common shared foundation or basis for morality is being seriously challenged by a variety of relativist ethics today as in Protagoras' thinking. Morality for Protagoras as we saw just as nowadays is culture/religion specific. This in the name of antifoundationalism, a term coined in the 1970's (Bok:350, Bernstein:8-16). Like Protagoras, it is denied

that there can be absolutely secure insights grounding our moral (and epistemological) knowledge. Likewise it is argued that insights are rather based on purely subjective and contingent experience (Bok:350). Today it is argued that universal moral codes, would amount to an ahistorical matrix or reference. No such matrix can be said to exist. As Protagoras said, there is also no way for us to find it. There are no objective permanent universal moral values. What would foundations constitute? Examples are Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. Other well known foundations are religious (certain moral values are divinely ordained), natural law (values are part of the natural order). This order may be practical reason (Kant) or "engraved in our hearts" (Cicero), Platonist or neo-Platonist claiming that it exists outside of us objectively. In all cases, their being is independent of us and therefore not subjective. In other words they are not agent relative even though it may be situated in agents. They are eternally valid and so timeless.

Contemporary relativists describe this as being tantamount to objectivism: there can be no secure foundation for morality whether religious or of a natural order or whatever (Bok:351, Bernstein). Neither can there be a common foundation when there are a plurality of cultural contexts. It is deduced that there are no cross cultural objective referees or norms. However contemporary relativists are mostly not individual relativists. Unlike Protagoras, they would not claim that there are no values that can be adhered to. They even would not claim that the values have no validity. Contemporary relativists would claim that values have validity, but in a strong sense only within a particular cultural or social context. Any values proposed to exist beyond these contexts, amount to foundationalism and so objectivism¹. Relativism now means absolutely relative, dependent upon context. What is regarded as valid epistemologically or morally, is determined by cultural communities. What is right or good for one society need not be right or good for another, even when the situation is similar. The moral claim is that what is right or good in one case need not be right or good in another. This meta ethical relativism further claims that there are no objectively sound procedures for justifying one moral code or one set of moral judgements over against another (Nielsen:316). Two, three four different moral codes may be equally "justified" or "reasonable". There is no way of establishing what is "the true moral code" or what is the singly correct set of moral beliefs among conflicting sets of belief (Nielsen:316). For many like Rorty, true morality is reduced to solidarity with the ethnocentric cultural community.

Richard Rorty (23) distinguishes between three kinds of relativisms: 1) every belief is as good as the other. Self refuting 2). Morally good is equivocal, having as many meanings as there are procedures of justification. This he regards as eccentric. 3) Nothing is to be said about

either the truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures justification which a given society uses who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible. This is the option that Rorty chooses, except he does not regard it as relativism.

The problem with relativism is that the possibility of a common universal morality is ruled out. Without shared values internationally, no common action is possible against many crimes. Recently (May 2005) the news reported that no laws exist nationally and largely internationally, to counter trafficking in human beings, including children. In South Africa alone about 3000 people disappeared which means about nine persons per day. These people are being lured by criminal syndicates and others by lies, threats, force and forced labor, and wages. Especially children are soft targets. What if there is no consensus that human trafficking is wrong? Although unlikely, there may be cultures who do not have a problem with and may argue that it is the right of parents to sell children. This is in their own interest. Mostly, however, the children and others disappear without any consent. Some may even not have a problem with telling lies or threats by force. So, it may even appear that in one cultural context child slavery or abuse may be regarded as morally commendable and in others not. This ties up with the relativist stance that cultural contexts and their moral value systems are incommensurable. There is no universal measuring yardstick or matrix to compare these incommensurable value systems and to find a common ground.

Sisela Bok (357) makes use of a myth that John Locke refers to in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* about the foundation of the world. I adapt this myth somewhat: It claims that the world is supported by a great elephant. When asked what the elephant rested upon, the answer was: a great tortoise; but being again pressed to know what gives support to the broad-backed tortoise, he replied another tortoise, and another one, and another one. And all these tortoises? Something, he knew not what. In other words the tortoises must inhere in another more substantial tortoise or a substance of a kind. The metaphor of the elephant calls for an infinite regress of tortoises. Are there tortoises, foundations all the way down? "Show me the foundations all the way down, or admit that there are none!" (Bok:352). Bernstein (16) sees in this search "downwards" a need for an absolutist rock bottom, a search for foundations an anxiety: everything is going to crumble, all fall down if there is no firm ground below. He calls it a "Cartesian anxiety", that "underneath" everything that is not to be regarded as merely arbitrary, there must be something else. The inference then lies near at hand that either the need for some impossible absolutist "rock bottom" or else infinite regress threatens any foundational claim (Bok:352).

Descartes in his *Meditations* tells of a journey of the soul, a meditative

journey of reflection on human finitude which is eminently fallible and subject to all sorts of contingencies. The terrifying quality of this journey is reflected by allusions to darkness, madness, dread if awakening from a self deceptive dream world, the fear of having "all of a sudden fallen into very deep water" where "I can neither make certain my setting my feet on the bottom, nor can I swim and so support myself on the bottom, nor can I swim and so support myself on the surface – dread, fear anxiety (Bernstein:17,18). Is Descartes' thinking on this not still applicable to our times?

Yet in our global community, practice demands practice. It is forced upon cultures and societies to decide and act upon at least some actions as just or unjust, humane or inhumane wherever they occur. A problem is that within a relativist approach it is not clear why we should stand unflinchingly for our convictions realizing that their validity is only relative.

I also argue that timeless, permanent, unchangeable, absolute secure foundations are unlikely. Now, does this mean that there are no foundations? Does the postulating of foundations necessarily imply a series of tortoises all the way down? I do not think so. The situation in epistemology where the issue is truth and so much good and right, is somewhat different, and I leave that now.

So, when it comes to ethics, I would argue that *limited common foundations* are quite possible. Substrata, tortoises in an infinite regress (foundationalism) can be avoided. So, my point is that the term "foundation" can be used without a foundationalist connotation. In a limited sense we can still talk about foundations without seeking tortoises, unchangeable foundations all the way down. It is rather a search as arguing, debate, dialogue. Search for certainty yes, but not absolute certainty. We do not provide an unchallengeable basis for belief².

Foundations or grounds would rather be an issue of, what Kuhn, Bernstein and Ziman would say: "giving good reasons for..." Not only just to place or set the ground, but to substantiate, to justify with good reasons. Our conclusions would be considered judgements. These considered judgements, including the firmest among them, do not have a *sui generis* ontological status which would render them unchangeable (Nielsen:317).

Yet we cannot do without bases: it is indispensable for communication and deliberation about moral matters. Apart from the practical need, I think it makes sense to claim that in addition to the particular local values, common universal values are in principle possible. A pointer to this is the fact that there is a massive number of mundane beliefs and desires and concerns which run together with ours. Normal people like ourselves, in all cultures, times, see as do we the sun rising and hear the wind and feel the rain on them and the sun warming their skin. They also believe they need food to eat, water to drink and have a need for sleep, some will have young

and will realise that these young for a time need to be cared for in order to survive, they also believe there is such a thing as getting dark and it is getting light and so on. People die, people mostly do not respond with joy, but grieve. Burial rituals abound in all cultures. If we do not assume such commonplaces about other cultures than ours, we would not even understand what it is for them to have a language for us to interpret or understand. We have a common situation, common human nature, we are creatures who have beliefs, desires, intentions, needs and interests.

These communalities prepare the ground for giving us a good reason to think that one could move towards values that are held in common by all human beings and cultures. Its application can be worked out in all human societies and cultures. This basis of morality calls for no permanent matrix or guarantees of objectivity and absoluteness. It rather provides a common framework as a footing upon which to undertake dialogue, debate and negotiations within and between otherwise disparate traditions: a set of values that can be agreed upon as a starting point for negotiation or action. It is a stable component of what they can hold in common. This means that cross cultural judgements may be possible (Bok:354). Constraints on certain practices such as lying, promise-breaking, non-torture, murder and other forms of violence, would be very strong candidates for such common conclusions (Bok:354,356). Without some such basis for debate and dialogue, collective responses to threats to survival, posed by wars, environmental issues, epidemics that recognize no linguistic or cultural boundaries, would not be possible. It means that we can universally transcend agent relative values, where the specification of the reason ineliminably refers to the agent herself – Nagel calls it agent neutral, and so objective real reasons (Nagel in Hills:17). Such agent transcending morality would contribute to the value of the world (Comp. Hills:17). When we construct from whatever starting point, and sometimes within starting points like cultural contexts, rational beings presuppose that his/her proposed knowledge is not private opinion and to remain as such, but to appeal to all in principle. It has a universal intent. I therefore agree with Alison Hills (4) when she says “Reasons must, in a sense, be universal”.

Does this mean that all cultural, social and religious contexts ought to be abandoned or replaced? I do not think so. It does not follow. Reason is situated reason. In working for a critical morality, to make sense of issues like cloning, our cultural context, our traditions, are good starting points, but also returning points. There can be no simple stepping out of our cultural traditions and societies, no stepping out of our life world. We will never be without more or less local identities. We have come to be who and what we are through our own historical tradition. We are all born into cultures.

But on the other hand we are not imprisoned by contexts. We need not

be ethnocentrically hobbled by them (Nielsen:320). No belief is in principle immune to criticism and traditions can be repaired, transformed and changed. We are inescapably enculturated into our traditions as the initial situation, but here Socrates is in this contemporary respect also right that an unexamined life, is not worth living. We have the capacity to question or react in various ways. Still we need to have first been enculturated into a tradition, before we would even be able to react. In a sense tradition is the first word. We do not want an unquestionable cosy set of beliefs; we need to examine them from time to time. This examining sometimes leads to a puncture of cosy beliefs.

Furthermore, just as we are part of our life worlds and local contexts, we are also part of the world community and context. The latter is not an abstraction, but would become one, if the local contexts are denied or ignored. Many things will remain culturally religiously dependent or relative to it. This means many values are indeed culture specific and so relative to cultural/religious/social contexts. My point, however, is that this relativity to cultural contexts need not be relativism's relative to contexts. It also need not presuppose a total incommensurability.

This is where I think our limited foundations come in. Even as situated reason, our starting points can be cultural prejudices. Gadamer would say these judgements, prejudices, in trans cultural fusion of horizons can and ought to be critically scrutinized. So, from them and in many instances without them, we can move towards a limited foundation for judgements on crime, terrorism, cloning etc. With a cluster of arrived considered moral judgements we can start to match them with our more general cultural or religious principles to see whether they are consistent with them, eg view on value of life. It is a weaving process. After examining them, we sometimes winnow out those which are no longer acceptable or perhaps inconsistent (Nielsen:317). We critically weave and unweave the fabric of our beliefs until we get for a time, but only for a time, the most consistent and firm stable package which best squares with everything we reasonably believe we know, and to which we, on reflection, are most firmly committed (Nielsen:317,318). We will arrive at extensively fixed points, points which always may obtain everywhere, anywhere, anywhen, but they are still provisional fixed points: they are in principle never beyond question, if they turn out not to fit in with the web of our beliefs and reflective commitments, commitments which will not be extinguished when we take them to heart under conditions of undistorted discourse (Nielsen:318)³.

Together with Nielsen (319) I would call this an attempt to forge a critical morality. We all have our starting points of background beliefs, cultural contexts. To scrutinize our background beliefs as well, would be what Socrates would have said an examined life more worth living. Because

this has to do with our lives. On this critical moral ground there are no unexamined ultimate, final appeal. There are no final foundational elements hidden or explicit. We seek to shuttle back and forth between considered judgements, moral principles, moral contexts, social theories until we get a firm point that would meet our reflective expectations and hopes (Nielsen:320). For example, people from many cultures may arrive at a firm moral view on drugs, rape, terrorism, child abuse. These firm views, when accepted, can be consistent with local cultural, religious value systems even though these systems may differ in many respects. For a time, and only for a time, a stable reflective balance fixed point about crime, will come to exist. But, this is part of the unending dialectical process of weaving and unweaving the patterns of our belief in order to make sense of our lives, to see things as comprehensively and connectedly as we reasonably can, and to guide our conduct.⁴

Saying all this we are not going for scepticism, because we do not go for merely a consensus, but a rational consensus. We will have good reasons for undistorted discourse (Habermas). This is the critical morality or fallibilism, and not relativism. In fact a critical morality would be impossible if relativism is true. There would be no comparison across cultural schemes, and we could not in principle get our considered judgements into wide effective balance. Relativism is an incoherent picture of the world in which there is an undifferentiated reality or content, conceptualizing different ways by incommensurable totalizing and ubiquitous conceptual schemes. It makes no sense to speak of alternative realities each with their own truths untranslatable into another way of thinking. "The idea that there could be wholly untranslatable conceptual scheme radically distinct from ours which would conceptualize reality in a radically different way is an incoherent picture" (Nielsen:331).

However, our reason being led by intuition, we may intuitively sense something of value and construct it rationally. A good example is human dignity and human rights which are sensed intuitively. This explains why it is accepted by all cultural contexts today. In a personal and recent (2003) conversation I had with the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, he told me, upon a question, why it is so that human rights are accepted by so many cultures, he told me that he thinks it is an issue of intuition. In so many words he said that it is something universally human. And I do not think that saying this it is an appeal to foundationalism, neither is it a fall back to modernity. Human dignity and right have long ago emancipated themselves from unchallengeable modernist grounds or foundations. To say that we can intuitively discern something or use reason as we do now in a critical morality, is a way of proceeding and not stating foundations. The idea that there could be a wholly untranslatable cultural context radically distinct from

ours, is an incoherent picture. We are not inescapably relativised. We need not fall back on Protagoras' relativism, but rather on Socrates' dictum of an unexamined life that is not worth living.

Protagoras' value in this issue is that even though he represents an extreme point of view, this view eventually evoked additional extremes such as foundationalism and objectivism. My arguing for a critical morality, for non-foundationalist foundations, could be said lies somewhere in the middle. In this Protagoras has contributed indeed much to the current debate.

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Endnotes

1. Take note that this is the relativist understanding of objectivism. I myself would rather distinguish between objectivity and objectivism. Objectivism would indeed imply a total independent world outside us, out there. Our knowledge of it are copies or mirror images. Objectivity would imply a dialogue between subject and object where none is completely independent from each other. This dialogue is dialectical. Relativists however equate objectivity with objectivism. This is why I have a problem with Rorty's usage of the term "dualism".
2. Sisela Bok prefers to speak of a minimalist approach. She argues for the possibility of arriving at a few moral principles which are not foundationalist and not timeless ahistorical. I argue for the same, as far as the latter is concerned. However, I disagree as far as the first is concerned: What would "limited" mean? It seems she has in mind a number of moral principles which cannot be exceeded. I argue to the contrary that a non-foundationalist approach need not be minimalist. Rather it can be open ended. Surely it cannot be a mass quantity of principles, because then one could find it difficult to reconcile a large number of principles with a cautious rational critical way of moving.
3. Unlike Nielsen who prefers to avoid the term foundations or bases, and rather uses the expression "fixed points", I see no contradiction in using both: a non-foundationalist foundation is indeed a fixed point, firm and stable—but in principle can change. There are good reasons why they are stable.
4. Nielsen describes his critical morality as coherentism and that we (in a Rortian fashion) must see things in our own lights. I do not have a problem with the coherent

approach when foundationalism is avoided. However, I think more is involved than coherence. Coherence indeed makes our claims more convincing, being more rational. However an opposing claim may at the same time also be coherent. I would prefer the role of intuition. We intuitively know that a rational (and coherent) construction about child abuse being morally wrong is preferable above the opposite that this abuse is morally commendable. As I will point out later, humans from different backgrounds can intuitively know many things in quite the same way. This indirectly links up with so many common mundane beliefs I referred to a while ago.