IN A WORLD CHARACTERIZED BY MORAL PLURALISM, 
IS DIALOGIC CONSENSUS A WAY TO ESTABLISH MORAL TRUTH?

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ABSTRACT. A system of morals aims at providing guidance in the resolution of moral conflict. Our era is characterized by widely disparate personal and cultural values and, hence, significant moral pluralism. Thus, different social and historical cultures regard different actions as permissible or impermissible. We contend that a contemporary moral epistemology is not based on absolute moral facts, but neither is it simply relative to our own cultural mores. It is somewhere “in between.” Given our disparate ethical perspectives, we need a means of approaching morally dilemmatic situations. Appeals to a common morality constitute one such means. Another is via moral dialogue amongst those affected by the situation in question. We examine certain paradigm cases which, from the standpoint of most moralities, would be considered absolutely wrong-actions. We ask whether the setting of apparently wrong actions in context can serve to mitigate an apparently evil act, or the actor herself. If we are to peacefully coexist, and indeed flourish, then we need to dialogue about our disparate beliefs, understand them in context, and aim to reach consensual agreement about what is right and not right, permissible or impermissible. The requirements and difficulties in such a process of moral argumentation seeking dialogic consensus, and hence normative force, are considered.

Keywords: argumentation; dialogic consensus; discourse; ethics; moral pluralism; moral decision-making


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Introduction

The development of a system of morals is a characteristic feature of human societies. In part, such systems aim to guide decision making about what is permissible and what is impermissible, as well as providing guidance in resolving conflicts between and among individuals and groups. Although such systems are codified in different ways across cultures, there is evidence across different societies of a uniform morality around certain ideas – of justice, altruism, and punishment (Henrich et al., 2006: 1767–1770), and notions of harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (Haidt & Graham, 2007: 99, 103–106). That is, certain moral rules appear to have biological support that transcends cultural differences. Pervasive as they are, they may have an evolutionary origin. It is argued, for example, that evolutionary biological predispositions or intuitions modulated pro-social behavior as increasingly large social groups developed (Moll, de Oliveira-Souza, & Zahn, 2008). Furthermore, neuro-genetic investigations recognize genes which may code for violence and for altruism, suggesting that humans might be “hard-wired” for certain moral perspectives and beliefs. Notwithstanding such perspectives, however, different social and historical cultures regard different actions as permissible or impermissible; thus, a degree of cultural relativism is seen as commonplace.

Human beings are necessarily in relationship with each other so, in order to flourish as societies, recognition of these inter-subjective bonds seems essential even in spite of our differing ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. As components of our concept of normativity, the actions of a moral agent can be evaluated as being right or wrong, good or bad, and permissible or impermissible; furthermore, moral agents themselves are able to be held responsible for their actions and can themselves therefore be judged as good or bad. That is, the act itself, and the actor herself, are separable notions. We explore below traditional and more contemporary approaches to addressing these realities.

Traditional Approaches

It is inevitable that individuals and groups in society will face dilemmas in their decision-making. Some moral disagreements are not about whether an act is wrong, but on what basis the act is wrong. To contrast just two traditional approaches to moral truth, we refer to moral absolutism and moral relativism. A moral absolutist argues that there are substantive moral facts, moral properties, tags or descriptors which label certain actions as absolutely morally wrong and hence impermissible regardless of circumstances. These moral facts confer an absolute and incontestable right or wrong to an action by a person, independent of the person’s own socio-cultural mores and heritage. At the other extreme, a moral relativist argues that moral rightness or wrongness is a matter of societal or historico-cultural custom and convention.
From an historical perspective, in the classical epoch, ethical appeal was made to the *polis* or to gods. In the medieval era, it was made to God. In the modern era ethical appeal in Western settings looks towards the rational frameworks of deontology, teleology or virtue ethics, among others. Under these frameworks, the moral permissibility of an act or decision depends either on the intrinsic nature of the act (i.e. we make choices to act on the basis of a maxim which has universal validity for every rational being, and so we cannot use others merely as a means to an end) or on the consequences of the act or decision (i.e. we make choices to act which potentially offer the greatest nett benefit for the greatest number of people) or we seek to proportionately balance duties or rules with empirical consequences in order to find the virtuous mean in the situation at hand.

Which of these frameworks to apply, and when, is complicated by the widespread differences in the values that various social and cultural groups prioritize, and differences in the context in which actual moral dilemmas arise. At least some allowance needs to be made for geographical location (for example, first world versus third world with regard to poverty or carbon emissions), scale (for example, the potential global impact of a nuclear or biological catastrophe) and time (for example, enumerating the present denominator versus future denominators).

Our contemporary societies are different from those of earlier eras. This is partly because our world is characterized by far greater travel, and sophisticated and increasingly widely available technological innovations, especially with regard to communication and social media. These assist global dissemination of widely diverse cultures and belief systems. Deep-reaching cultural, religious, social, ethno-political and value diversity inevitably follows. Lines between autonomy and freedom, justice and liberty, and conceptions of what is perceived as a good life, become blurred, and so disparate values are inevitably accompanied by significant moral pluralism. This situation is exacerbated by the twin facts that morally dilemmatic situations are located in different contexts, and the moral decision-makers themselves are subject to different historical and socio-cultural backgrounds.

What we explore herein, is whether there exists a moral epistemology appropriate to such a contemporary reality.

Clearly, we cannot design an experiment able to empirically prove that any action we might take is absolutely “morally true,” in the same way that we can prove it “scientifically true” that gravitational fields exist by repeatedly tossing an object up into the air and watching it fall. Although cultural relativities can determine what people *think* is morally right or wrong, this is not the same as saying that customs determine what *is* right or wrong. When dealing with actions or decisions which impinge upon others, we have a requirement to find a moral epistemology which can bring our disparate ethical perspectives into accordance in the search for moral truth, and which is also normative. This is especially relevant, and challenging, given our contemporary era’s widely disparate ethical viewpoints and pronounced value pluralism.
One approach to moral decision-making in the setting of the wider community can be referred to as a *common morality*. Common moralities underscore the community’s involvement in decision-making, directly or via exception. *Dialogic consensus* is another procedural approach which offers a potentially effective way of reaching agreement about moral truth in the particular context at hand.

**Common Moralities and Argumentation**

Several forms of common morality exist. Beauchamp distinguishes the common morality from particular moralities. Their common morality is comprised of that set of non-relativistic, universalistic norms shared by all persons committed to morality. It encompasses the absolute obligations of do not kill, do not harm, prevent evil, rescue those in danger, nurture the young, amongst others, as well as certain moral virtues (honesty, truthfulnes, gratitude, also amongst others) (Beauchamp, 2003). This is distinguished from a particular morality which applies, for example, to different times (for example, homosexuality), different circumstances (for example, over-crowded, sinking lifeboats wherein the navigator is excluded from drawing lots as to who should be thrown overboard), and different professions (for example, confidentiality between client/lawyer). Moral relativity is applicable to particular moralities but not to the common morality. For Beauchamp, common morality consists of the historical cumulative product of human moral experience or wisdom found in all cultures, not *a priori* principles, and these “make no appeal to pure reason, rationality, natural law, a special moral sense, or the like” (Beauchamp & Childress, 2009: 387).

K. Danner Clouser and Bernard Gert see morality as a public system, including how, in practice, to make moral judgments. The moral theory which underpins this system includes four parts (Clouser & Gert, 1990). Most germane to the discussion here is the procedure to follow when violation of a moral rule can be justified. They describe moral rules which must be followed – do not kill, do not cause pain, do not disable, do not deprive of freedom, do not cause harm, do not deceive, keep your promises, do not cheat, and obey the law. All violations to these rules are immoral actions – unless that violation can be publically justified. In deciding right action in a particular circumstance, a decision must be made whether to allow violation of the moral rules. In determining whether it is permissible to make an exception requires, first, that the morally relevant features are identified, and, second, that we weigh the potentially harmful and beneficial consequences of (publically) allowing the violation (Gert, 2004: 19). It is action-guiding, in that it includes a two-step process; this is, first, to apply the moral rules, and, second, to decide whether allowing an exception to be made in the morally dilemmatic situation at hand can be publically justified. Under this conception, moral reform, in the sense of emancipating slaves or recognizing the moral status of cloned humans, is not reform of morality itself but, rather, reform of society’s moral beliefs.
Tim Scanlon reverses Kant’s question about the justification of a moral decision, namely, whether a rational agent could universally will it. He asks instead whether a reasonable person could reject it (Scanlon, 1982: 110). Thus, the statement “everyone ought to follow the principles that no one could reasonably reject,” without either coercion or ignorance, captures what, in Scanlon’s view, it means to justify your actions to others. Integral is the necessity that the grounds for rejection are compared with other people’s grounds for not rejecting it. Judgments must be made about the relative import of the grounds for rejection.

Alasdair MacIntyre contends that philosophical comment upon morality should not be a mere abstract, action-neutral observance, but should be dynamically interactive with society (MacIntyre, 1998: 3). To allude to what follows, we see significant value in revisiting a movement from a substantive conception of the philosophy of ethics, towards a more procedural conception, as a response to moral pluralism. This can be characterized as a migration towards a set of procedures involving a moral community, emphasizing values and norms reached by active and reflective communicative consensus, and thus possessing both cognitive and normative force (Walker & Lovat, in press). This approach is that of dialogic consensus (Walker & Lovat, 2016). Such an approach captures an awareness of others, our necessary inter-connectedness, and the fact that alternative viewpoints to one’s own exist and are likely to be just as valid as our own (Levinas, 1999: 97–100). Grounding our encounter in and with the other contributes to this understanding. It is clear that we favor the second-person moral perspective, namely that of mutually shared co-responsibility for respect and care, over both that of the subjective, agent-relative and egotistical first person moral perspective, as well as that of the objective, agent-neutral and egalitarian third person moral perspective (Verlinden, 2010: 87), (Barber, 2008: 635), (Barber, 2008: 641).

**Paradigm Cases**

There are some shared normative beliefs that are held by most people. We have mentioned torture, infanticide, child-killing and rape as wrong-actions. These are viewed by most moral persons as absolutely wrong. That is, there can be no circumstances or possible benevolent consequences which make these actions morally permissible, or ever right-actions. Nonetheless, they are not universally impermissible. These actions are acceptable to certain cultural groups. The question is whether these are still absolutely wrong and, if so, on what basis. One possibility is that these actions are in fact absolutely morally impermissible in any context, and therefore those who commit these acts are (simply) evil. They may or may not know what is right, but they nonetheless commit an evil act. The other possibility is that these actions are usually wrong but, in certain contexts, might not be, and so could come to be understood as permissible in a particular context. Or at least, given context, the actor may not be evil. Essentially, we ask whether the setting of apparently wrong actions in context can be mitigating to an apparently evil act and,
if so, how can we determine the context? Furthermore, will knowledge of mitigation mean that we, and they, can become tolerant of the ethical perspective of others in the particular context?

Consider torture. Under the deontological framework, torture in order to find the whereabouts of an explosive bomb is impermissible under any circumstances. Under a teleological framework, it is permissible if sufficient people benefit from the action. However, torture, including “enhanced interrogation,” is being undertaken in various parts of the world and might well be on the rise as terrorist-based organizations become more emboldened and less caring about civilian populations against which they wage war. International laws – the Geneva Conventions, the UN Convention against Torture, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, all decree that torture is illegal in absolute terms, that is, irrespective of the victim’s conduct, at least as far as they apply to prisoners of war on home soil. Nonetheless, there are situations in which those at the helm of the State allow deviations from the law, allegedly in order to protect the security of the State (Brown, 2007: 6). We ask how else this necessity could be reasonably, and perhaps then truthfully, determined except by a process of legal or political discourse within the community, either ex ante (that is, before the torture occurs) or ex post (that is, after it occurs, so as to retrospectively provide moral acquiescence to what remains an illegal act).

Rory Brown notes that the right answer to the dilemma of whether torture can be justified cannot be reached by appeal to the normative frameworks. The answer can only be approached through what he describes as reflection and communicative discourse. He suggests that analysis, including the use of hypothetical situations, can challenge weaknesses in the arguments proposed in order to tease out the correct answer and that no reflection or discourse can be evaluated without recourse to the socio-political context in which it is located. He goes on to suggest that hypothetical examples might indeed help us to locate “the pressure points of the debate or false foundations upon which certain standpoints are built” (Brown, 2007: 5). The discourse about whether torture was justified in this instance would necessarily be complex, with a multiplicity of competing values and potential ethical approaches to the values to be discussed. Nonetheless, we contend that the only way to seek the moral truth is to engage in that discourse via coming to understand the values which motivate both sides. In other words, it is only after a process of dialogue and argumentation that we can say that an act is wrong. Logically, therefore, we can also only ascribe moral responsibility to the actor after a similar dialogue.

Consider infanticide. Arguably, Peter Singer replaces the traditional bioethical emphasis on the unique value (“sanctity”) of human life with an emphasis on reducing suffering – simply because suffering is evil, wherever it exists. Problems with the (absolute) sanctity of human life follow from an understanding that there is no single moment of conception, that many fertilized ova fail to implant, and the potential for twinning up around 14 days after conception, with concurrent dilemmas about twin-souls and split souls, exists. Termination of pregnancy before birth is
legal under almost every legislation. In contrast, termination after birth (infanticide) is illegal under almost every legislation. Generally, abortion is legal much closer to term for a severe fetal anomaly. Yet, if that fetus is born prematurely, at exactly the same gestational age, with exactly the same severe fetal anomaly, infanticide is illegal. This inconsistency needs to be subjected to scrutiny and argumentation. Consider a mother who has pre-term amniocentesis which shows the presence of a reversed chromosome (Taylor, 2000: 13), the effect of which is not known but could be associated with a fetal abnormality which has a low risk of being significant. Having considered the options, she chooses to terminate her baby. A well-reasoned argument could be made that since the prognosis is unknown, it is better to proceed to birth, and then, if there is a significant anomaly, terminate. If there is no fetal anomaly, this is better for the baby, as well as for the mother and her family. But infanticide is a very likely candidate in most people’s estimation for an absolutely impermissible action, since it is viewed as murder regardless of circumstances.

Both child-molestation and child-killing are exceptionally difficult for most people to justify under any rational framework. In 2014, in Peshawar, Pakistan, the Taliban murdered 132 children. A Taliban supporter argued that since the children had not sinned, they went straight to Paradise (Harris & Nawaz, 2015: 85–86) and this was, in that respect, a beneficent act. It would seem likely that, even after dialogue with the Taliban supporters in trying to understand their perspective, the outcome would nonetheless be condemnation of this act. Yet, the Taliban perpetrators believed sufficiently in their actions to kill themselves too. As will be seen below, there are certain requirements for a consensual dialogue to have validity. One requirement would seem to be a willingness to listen to the other. If, for example, the Taliban were unwilling to engage in a meaningful dialogue, they would exclude themselves from the process, despite the rationality of their arguments according to their own perspective.

Rape is wrong under the framework of deontology because it is impermissible for one to use another person as a means to one’s own end, and the action emphatically contravenes the dignity of a person. It is also wrong under the teleological view because it brings about major disutility to the victim. Additionally, it is wrong under a virtue ethics framework because it fails to maximize the good of one party and in fact does great harm to that party. Using similar arguments, murder of another moral agent is wrong. Nonetheless, while aware of the above, might it not be possible to consider the case of a child soldier coerced into being part of a war and conclude that his rape or murder of other innocents possesses some mitigating circumstances? Let us say that he was coerced into the war after his parents were shot and in exchange for the sparing of his siblings. In order to continue the protection of his siblings, and completely caught-up in the rebels’ propaganda, he rapes and kills other innocents as part of his ongoing “responsibilities.” Who can ultimately judge the morality of the actor in a case like this without exploring the facts and engaging in a dialogue?
In other words, if it is accepted that we can mount a logical argument for a hierarchy of rules and consequences within our ethical frameworks, can we not also mount an argument for the existence of mitigating contexts even concerning actions which are viewed *prima facie* as absolutely wrong? At the least, the act is wrong but, given the circumstances or context, the actor might not be guilty of wrong-doing. Knowing this, and knowing that some normative questions are answerable only with varying degrees of precision, can this be extended towards the permissibility of an apparently evil act by an actor? We argue this in the affirmative. That is, that it is only after dialogue that we can determine the rightness and wrongness (the moral truth) of an act and its actor.

If so, then it might also be reasonable to dismiss the notion of the existence of a single moral code, inextricably attached to actions. Furthermore, we can only allow for hierarchies, exceptions and mitigating circumstances via a meaningful dialogue – one which is unforced, inclusive and reflective, a dialogue which is sufficiently fortified in its foundations so as to achieve dialogic argumentation and consensus. This is a dialogue which is predicated upon establishing which facts, which values, and which contextual features might be relevant so that we can genuinely determine that which aims to maximize the best interests of all persons affected. It is clear that moral philosophers, despite the fact that absolute truth in knowledge is elusive, cannot insist too much on the importance of both factual knowledge and clarity of the concepts (values) for the solution of moral problems.

Potentially, at least, we can mount an argument for and against almost every action in different situations. This is not at all to say that all facts are equal; that is, we can credibly grade the importance of some facts as being more helpful to the argumentative process than others. Nor is it to say that decisions, acts or actors are never wrong. Rather, we are arguing that in our pluralistic world, we cannot with absolute certainty say which acts or actors are always automatically right, and which are similarly wrong, without engaging in dialogue about it. At the same time, we are not suggesting that the mere collecting of information *per se* is what we mean here by moral dialogue. Moral dialogue entails argumentation with certain specific characteristics in the search for a consensual decision. Hugh LaFollette argues for “the exercise of cultivated moral judgement” (LaFollette, 1991: 146–147). To us, “a cultivated moral judgement” implies more than an ethical monologue with oneself, involving only the first-person perspective and allowing for the perspective of others only through one’s own optic. Rather, it connotes a deliberate discussion, a process of argumentation, a moral dialogue, amongst those affected, wherein each participant can offer her perspectives to the group about the situation at hand. Such an approach is mindful of the dignity of our shared humanity and our intersubjective bonds at a level beyond what we need in order not to annihilate each other.
Argumentation and Dialogic Consensus

Dialogue, or discourse, refers to the use of language as part of a social practice. The more formal “dialectic” has been defined as “to pass from one part – an object, a notion, a problem – to another by the means of language and reason” (UNESCO, 2007: 248). The association of dialectic with truth-seeking after reasoned argument has a very long history. In The Sophist, Plato’s Socrates contrasted dialectic with sophistry. Philosophers favored dialectic – in which they offered and received arguments, evaluated them for truth and meaning, and thus sought to discover truth in the arguments presented.

As significant confounding factors for moral truth-seekers, psychological factors are well-recognized overlays of which they are generally unaware (Appiah, 2009: 38–51). These factors range from “Me-Hurt-You” scenarios (an identifiable person, in a potentially physically harmful situation, addresses me personally, which impacts on my fMRI) (Greene et al., 2001) through to reacting more compassionately in less stressed, quieter or even more pleasantly-smelling environments. Both the in-group/loyalty tendency to which Haidt and Graham have alluded (Haidt & Graham, 2007), and the proximity of the agent to special other persons, act as moral motivators. Special other persons, to whom we might feel we have a particular duty of care or obligation, include our children, our family, other people close to us personally or professionally, our compatriots, or, to generalize, people-like-us. This means that those who are different from us, in terms of distance, geographical locale, physical appearance, or in their cultural, religious, social or moral values, inevitably place on us a psychological overlay that suggests difference. This sense of difference might well lessen our proclivity to see their actions in a favorable moral light. We might then make moral decisions influenced by these in-group/out-of-group factors, rather than on a values-neutral, meritorious assessment of the action in its context. One important way to avoid this is to engage in dialogue, amongst all those affected, so as to come to recognize and minimize these psychological motivators.

More than simply a process of data collection, the moral dialogue we strive towards in order to make the determination that an action is permissible or not is based upon a process of inclusive, non-coercive and reflective encounters amongst the community impacted by the decision – one that is aimed at reaching a consensual decision about the action, in the context of the situation at hand. This process of dialogic consensus is based in part on two principles of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas’ principle of discourse morality requires that all affected people must be able to agree that the moral decision or action is universalizable to all those who will be affected by the decision or the action (Habermas, 1990: 198). All affected persons must agree to accept the consequences of the decision, both as satisfying and balancing their interests and as being preferable to known alternatives. The mechanics of the ideal process of argumentation are based upon Habermas’ principles of communicative action (Habermas, 1990), wherein speech is orientated to understanding, and hence consensual agreement, via an inclusive and non-coercive rational
dialogue. Presupposing characteristics of the dialogue include that each participant mutually considers each other to be accountable and ready and willing to reach mutual understanding. Discourse is rational and impartial and presupposes that participants successfully share the perspective of others. In this way, each acts so as to aim to reach consensus in the decision. Argumentation proceeds via language, which underpins meaning and, hence, values. Participants in the ideal dialogue use language the same way, or seek to clarify what they mean by the linguistic and non-linguistic expressions they use; each is allowed to participate and express their beliefs, each can question any proposal, and there should be no compulsion applied by or to any speaker. The dialogue has been characterized as a form of linguistic interaction “where all speech acts contain validity claims concerning comprehensibility, sincerity, truth and justification” (Jones, 2001: 70).

The facilitator of a moral dialogue has a pivotal role to play in achieving the practical realization of the requirements of dialogic consensus. She will likely be identifiable as someone without a vested interest, be trained in mediation and understand the principles of communicative action, as well as the requirements of the process itself. The participants themselves will be aware of the requirements of the process and will intend to participate with moral virtue and phronesis, or practical wisdom.

The process is not to be confused with morality by majority vote. Consensual agreement after dialogue is tolerant of value pluralism. It relies on the notion of mutual agreement constituting the moral decision that is best for the group in the situation at hand. Some might disagree with the decision but nonetheless accept that it is the best decision for the community. Participation should be discursive and detached and aimed at reaching consensus. This is not the same as contingent bargaining or strategically negotiated compromise, or even a modus vivendi. Brent Flyvbjerg articulates the requirements for truth and validity in a dialogue in the following way: no affected party should be excluded from the discourse; participants should have equal potential to present and criticize claims; participants must be willing and able to empathize with each other; power differences between participants are neutralized so they have no detrimental impact upon consensus; and, participants openly explain their goals and intentions and avoid deliberate manipulation of the argument (Flyvbjerg, 2000: 3–4). As well, sufficient time must be available to enact the process. Karl-Otto Apel argues that for those who enter into the discourse, this is the situation which they must anticipate, “the transcendental core” (Griffioen & Van Woudenberg, 1990: 18) of the discourse. We argue here that for persons aware of the moral domain, striving to make morally right and good decisions, the separation of ideal theory from what might indeed be the actual rationality (realpolitik, to use Flyvberg’s terminology (Flyvbjerg, 2000: 8)) is perfectly valid. It should be expected that moral decision makers recognize the significance of their decisions and so aim to truthfully make the “most right” or “most good” decision possible, without any decision maker feeling the need to manipulate or control the dialogue merely so as to “win.”
We should also be aware that conflicting values are not unexpected, and understanding that the dialogue is a moral encounter amongst persons means that our own moral integrity requires that we be tolerant of conflicting values. Dialogue seeks to clarify the ethical imperatives in the situation at hand, as each participant perceives them. This lays the groundwork for the resolution of those differences which remain without a sense of ethical surrender. Pragmatically, too, this may mean that the relationship amongst participants remains on-going despite a value conflict.

Put another way, those aware of the moral domain recognize the need for a moral philosophy that contains principles of conduct towards other persons which hold no matter how one’s own ethos, conception of the good, or form of life differs from their own. Because we are impelled to maintain our commitment to reaching consensus via dialogue, we must remain active in our responsiveness to conflicting values. Our own moral integrity requires that we are tolerant of conflicting values. “Moral sensitivity” has been characterized as entailing three parts, namely, an individual’s moral worldview, the evaluation of the ethical situation at hand, and the ability to negotiate with others (Muthusamy, 2015: 61). Dialogue, following upon recognition of responsibility to the other, allows us to seek what is the best-possible moral truth in the situation at hand.

We are not however suggesting that the process of dialogic consensus is not without difficulty, especially when ethical beliefs are held very strongly. Effective moral argumentation is only possible against a background of some agreement concerning at least the basic features of what is to be submitted to argumentation. By this, we mean that if, for example, one party believes that illness is God’s will and so it should not be subverted by medical intervention, since this belief is not possible to oppose by recourse to any form of medical trial design or to logical argument (at least without an impossibly long period of argument), then it can be decided by the community to exclude that party from further dialogue. This is not at all to say that we can legitimately narrow the community affected to include only those-like-us, so as to influence the process. Participants also exclude themselves from the process when they are unwilling to listen to others, or unwilling or unable to follow the rules for successful dialogic consensus (deliberate refusal or owing to mental illness), or they simply choose not to be involved in a dialogue about the action or decision.

We contend that the process which aims towards dialogic consensus imbues the moral decisions with moral authority and, hence, is action-guiding and so useful but, nonetheless, falls short of a claim to absolute moral truth.

Conclusion

Our contemporary age is characterized by pronounced value and moral pluralism. We argue that one response to this characteristic is to recognize that there are no absolute moral tags, universally acceptable, which define right or wrong acts. Nor,
however, is cultural acceptance alone sufficient to be discriminatory. Given the importance of context, and the potential presence of unique circumstances in every decision, a procedural approach of argumentation is the best way to justify a moral decision. Proper allowance for circumstances, valid exceptions to the “rules,” the weighting of different consequences, and so on, can only be allowed-for by beginning with a dialogue. Grounded in our inter-subjectivity and inter-connectedness, a process of dialogic consensus forces on us an active recognition of the viewpoints of others, regardless of how our own ethical values or life-choices differ from those of others. Especially in our contemporary era, it is only via public dialogue and properly-fortified argumentation which aims for dialogic consensus, under the conditions outlined, that we can normatively ascribe rightness or wrongness to acts and actors. Put another way, meaningful engagement with the dissonant voices of our contemporary multi-cultural, multi-faith society would seem to constitute a mature response to the problems of seeking a legitimate moral epistemology in our era.

NOTE

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