

THE RELATIVITY OF SOCIAL NORMS

It is a pleasure and an honor to be invited to speak at your "services" this morning. I assume it does not offend you for me to call this ^{gathering} a "service." I may be committing an egregious faux pas, for I understand Unitarians are too religious to follow conventional religious practices or labels. However, if I did not commit a few faux pas's, I would be out of step with my usual gaucherie, indicating a miraculous cure of my creeping foot-in-mouth disease. I will not blaspheme this esteemed gathering by suggesting that my presence among you has wrought a miracle.

It might not be too inappropriate for me to settle my feet on the ground and begin to talk about the subject announced in your newsletter. First, I must deny an allegation in the newsletter which generously ^{confers upon me} an imprimatur of authority and justification for me being here which I cannot honestly claim. I am flattered to think that Mrs. Harrell believes I hold a Doctor of Divinity degree, but my highest degree is in that, commonly regarded, lowest art of divination called law. I will admit that the two professions do have much in common, the logomachical exploitation for financial profit ~~of~~ the pathological proclivity of man to get into verbal problems and receive paregoric pleasure from verbal diarrhea. In short, both the men of the cloth and the bar make a living by running off at the mouth. I daressay some of you already feel that it would have been to your advantage and convenience if my wife had spiked my coffee this morning with a little paregoric.

Surely, the time has come for me to dispense with these medicinal and pedal puns and metaphors.

Various theories have been propounded for the explanation and cause of the genesis and development of social norms. (You must excuse my

legalese styles of talking which entails the lamination of nouns on top of nouns, adjectives on top of adjectives, and verbs on top of verbs precariously, dubiously, and obscurely connected conjunctively or disjunctively by "and" and/or "or." As industrial workers are sometime paid on a piece work basis, lawyers are sometimes paid on a word count basis. Perhaps, that explains my cornucopia of words.) Social norms are simply propositional conceptions of conduct that have "ought" or "should" auxiliary verbs. *either explicit or implicit* A norm itself is never a statement or assertion of fact, although obviously whether a given norm exists at any given time or place may be the subject matter of factual ^a statement or proposition. It was my original intention to trace historically the conception of or the attitude toward norms held by the ^{enlightened} ~~learned~~ ⁱⁿ elements of society, but I have, in a sense, begun with the end of the historical development and what I have already ~~said~~ is probably the soundest and most irrefutable argument for the claim that social norms are relative.

If it ^{is} claimed, as what I have already said implies, that a norm is not a statement of fact verifiable by logic or experience, then obviously a norm depends upon the subjective judgment or attitude of the person or society that holds it, not universal truth which can only be established by universal experience or logic. Of course, I am talking about positivism. Men such as Bertrand Russell, Ayer, Reichenbach, Carnap, Stevens, and *many* others have claimed that there are only two kinds of ^{possibly} valid, and, thus, meaningful statements or propositions; synthetic and analytic. These last two terms, I believe, were first used in this sense by Immanuel Kant. A synthetic propositions makes some kind of assertion regarding phenomena: The Declaration of Independence was signed and issued on July 4, 1776; it rained yesterday; water is composed of two elements, two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen; ³² free falling bodies fall ~~16~~ feet per second; the sun will rise at a certain time tomorrow morning. All of these

assertions say something that is conceivably and reasonably verifiable by experience, past, present, or future. It is pure subjective speculation to say that the Declaration~~s~~ of Independence should have taken place in 1861, it should not have rained yesterday, water ought to be composed of carbon and sulphur, free falling bodies should ~~x~~ rise because they would then glorify God who is in the heavens, the sun should also ~~r~~ise at noon because I hate to get up early and I ~~h~~ave a date with my girl friend at sunrise. Such statements cannot really be admitted or denied because they presuppose a personal subjective preference.~~which~~ That you have a preference is a fact, but it is not a fact that your preference is preferable in any verifiable sense. I should not like to elaborate this point further. I have published an article on~~x~~ it and you may ~~xx~~ cross examine me respecting it later.

Analytical proposition's may be true or false because they say nothing about fact or reality, but are only logical or mathematical propositions. An analytical proposition is true because it is a tautology or ^a redundancy; the predicate is included in the subject. All men~~x~~ are mortal, Socrates is a man. ^{Therefore} Socrates is mortal. You have really said nothing new by deductions, ^{in your premise} except to elaborate or make graphic what you have already said. Your predicate, [†] mortality has already been assumed to be an attribute of men. Whether Socrates is or was a man may be den~~a~~ble, but once you say he is a man, it inelucatably follows he is mortal. You could have just as well have said all X's are Y, X is Z, therefore, Z is Y.

Another way of stating this problem is to say ^a statement either ¹ indicate facts, express feel~~ing~~s, or seek to influence action. Only the first is verifiable in the sense of it being intrinsically valid, that is, its content may conceiably be proven or disproved. I say, ¹ "there are ten (10) people in here. That can be proven valid or inv~~al~~id. I say, ¹ "there should be a hundred people in here to hear my brilliant message." That is ¹ an expressive statement. My feeling that my message is brilliant,

which is a very questionable subjective self-appraisal, and my feeling that a hundred people should be here. What I feel should be, who is there among you that can really prove that my should-assertion is not valid to me.

I say, "You ought to get up and leave right now because I am taking nonsense."

Even if I am talking nonsense, is it true or false or verifiable whether

Certainly, from my experience of giving and hearing speeches, you should leave or not. / I may be seeking to influence you to leave but

the fact that the speaker talks nonsense has little to necessarily I am appealing to subjective reactions just as I am expressing

do with whether his audience stays or not. My mother regards any church service over an hour and a half as bad. I need not belabor this statement of the nature of norms. If they

are not verifiable, ~~or~~ true or false, then yours from this standpoint

are as valid as mine, just as the Chinese's, the Russian's, the Catholic's,

the Protestant's, the Democrat's, the Republican's, and the John Birchler's

norms are. It is this last sentence that makes us recoil from the idea of

the relativity of social norms. / I am not a Catholic, Republican, John Birchler,

Chinese or Russian, and thus I subscribe to believe in norms different

from theirs and presumably I have good reasons, I might even think verifiable

or true reasons, for rejecting some of their norms. But does this conviction

or feeling prove anything?

Since I have begun at the end of my historical sketch, let me suggest

the present theories in science which influence or affect this conception

of norms. Scientific theories have influenced ~~ideological~~ ^{normative} beliefs. When

When man thought the earth was the center of the Universe and the sun re-

volvied around the earth, he thought this world and its inhabitants had a

special place in the sun. This caused him to be geocentric and anthropo--

centric. Man was the purpose and center of the universe. Oceanic feelings

about the ultimate mystery of man and the God that created him have lost

much of their significance since science has determined that the earth is


a mere ^{pebble} ~~particle~~ of sand on a galactic beach, and man is but an infinitesimal

speck upon that grain of sand. Does this ~~mean~~ ^{that} mean the norms developed

in western ~~civilization~~ ^{societies} or, indeed, the norms of men everywhere have no more prominence or pre-eminence ^{can} than the earth in the Milky Way?

What about the Theory of Relativity ^{Quantum Mechanics} and the ~~Copenhagens School's~~ ^{Heisenberg's} principle of indeterminacy? Does not science today establish that the relativity of the physical world ^{it} has made ^{it} no more devoid of verifiable facts ^{it} than the symmetrical ^{it} determinable world of Newton? Because verifiable fact is relative, it does not mean such facts ^a are less ^{is} facts ^a than they ^{it} ~~were~~ ^{were} before? Does not relativity save norms from their discredited state of meaninglessness ^{it} which is claimed by the positivists? Does not the principle of indeterminacy or uncertainty of Heisenberg and the Copenhagen School suggest, as Eddington has suggested, the possibility of a ^{or conceivable} Divine Being who could work miracles and incarnate Himself in the body of Jesus Christ and thus make it scientifically tenable ^{it} that the norms of christianity have universal validity and truth, because of their ^{it} divine origin? I do not know.

There is nothing about the ^e general or special theory of relativity that ~~suggests~~ ^{it} ~~to~~ any different analysis of the nature of norms than I have already given. The Heisenberg Principle is more perplexing and I have not had time to fully reflect upon its implications for social science or theory.

I will say this, I believe it is unwise to too facilely translate the discoveries of physical or natural science into comparable ~~science~~ theories of social science. 

Indeed, even in natural science some theories do not universally explain the same class of events. For example, Newton's general laws adequately explain most terrestrial phenomena such as a falling ball or colliding cars; but ~~it~~ does not adequately explain sub-atomic phenomena as electrons escaping from an atom, radio-activity, or the collision of sub-atomic particles, nor does it adequately explain macroncosmic phenomena such as an expanding universe or interplanetary events, here Einstein's theory of relativity is more adequate.

Of the natural sciences, I suppose biological theories have more relevance to social theories because the subject matter of the theories is ~~is~~ closer in kind ^{and} or nature. But even here, for normative analysis, the evolving human mind embarrasses too sweeping generalizations.

I have at most only begun to state the problem. In simpler and more down to earth terms, to what extent do social norms depend upon their validity or acceptability on the particular group holding the norms in a particular time and place? Slavery has not always been regarded as immoral or improper. Why even in the United States, its complete rejection has only occurred comparatively recently, and then only after a fratricidal blood bath. Indeed, I am not sure some Americans still do not believe it is immoral. Only a few days ago, I believe, the Southern Baptist Conference ~~of~~ at some sort meeting in Dallas suggested that racial segregation and discrimination are immoral and unchristian. You are too familiar with cultural normative diversitits for it too be necessary for me to enumerate the many conflicting or different normative precepts various ~~of~~ cultures or societies hold, even within the so called Western Democracies, -- to say nothing regarding anthropological studies of non-western ^N industrialized states, communities, and tribes.

I have said natural science theories, concepts, and principles should not ~~to facility~~ ^{facilely} be translated into social theories, concepts and principles.

I will in part violate this warning by suggesting a parallel in insight between the field concept in Einstein's theory of relativity and the concept of cultural relativity. Einstein suggested that it is not the charges nor the particles but the field in the space between the charges and the particles which is essential for the description of physical phenomena. Gravitational effects were attributed to a change in the curvature of the world, due to the presence of matter in the ether. I suppose this matter in the ether and the mass of planets may affect the direction of a beam of light, it perhaps, not travelling in a straight line. Three dimensional space is not really the same for different observers ~~being~~ in motion. Indeed, space is not three dimensional but four dimensional, with time be another dimension. ^{Thus} ~~Does~~ the logical antinomy, the same statement or phenomena ~~cannot~~ cannot be both true and false at the same time or ~~appearances~~ be different at the same time, but the contrary may be asserted where two different observers are involved. The last statement is complicated and at the same time justified by the principle of ~~an~~ indeterminacy of Heisenber which suggests the act of observation inextricably affects or changes, in a substantial way, that which is observed. If there is this kind of uncertainty and relativity in physical phenomena how is possible to expect less in social phenomena.

The meaning of a statement depends upon who says it and who hears or reads it. "This dependence of meaning upon a personal frame of reference is something that many of us take for granted when we refuse to argue over affirmations of religious faith." Einstein established by his relativity theories the possibility of what is

the universal validity of the democratic concept of the rule of law. 2

^{and} ~~and~~ pragmatically apply it to non-western cultures, redefined and reshaped, in such a manner that it will not violently collide with indigenous patterns of ~~xxx~~ culture and ways of viewing reality. Obviously, the way of ~~xxx~~ viewing reality is fundamental because it causes conflicts and differences in our own comparatively homogeneous culture. My thesis is that the proper ~~xxxxxxxx~~ approach is not to try to totally reshape a cultural outlook, but to partially reshape the concepts to be sold and the buyer's~~s~~ outlook. Mutual respect and ~~xxx~~ enlightened sympathy and tolerance are indispensable for this ~~xxxx~~ task.

I had indicated to Mrs. Harrel that I would say something about the ^{relation of the} implications of existentialism to this problem. I also had hoped to be able to suggest a positive approach to social norms. However, I think I have talked long enough and have sufficiently suggested the relativity of social norms so that a fruitful discussion ~~xxx~~ ^{questionzzzzzzzanswerrzzzzz} ^{may} ~~be~~ now appropriately be embarked upon by the audience.

When I leave, I hope, you think, he, this morning's speaker, was worth your time.