

## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS: MORAL REASONING

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In his *Beyond Subjective Morality: Ethical Reasoning and Political Philosophy* (Yale University Press, 1984), James S. Fishkin seeks to counter the view that moral judgments are not rationally defensible, and he begins by reporting depth-interview comments made by "ordinary moral reasoners" and arguing that they cluster around seven ethical positions which are in a logico-hierarchical order, as follows (numbers in parentheses refer to statements in the appended Q sample):

- (a) *Absolutists*: Moral judgments are absolute, inviolable, and unquestionable (5, 11, 17, 24, 33)
- (b) *Rigorists*: Judgments are inviolable, but rationally questionable (9, 12, 21, 22, 35)
- (c) *Minimal Objectivists*: Ethical judgments are neither inviolable nor unquestionable, but are asserted as valid on the basis of reason (14, 18, 28, 30, 34)
- (d) *Subjective Universalists*: One's judgments are applied universalizably, even though they only have the status of tastes or preferences (3, 6, 15, 23, 29)
- (e) *Relativists*: Values apply interpersonally, but not necessarily universally (4, 7, 19, 26, 32)
- (f) *Personalists*: Moral judgments apply to oneself only (1, 8, 13, 16, 27)
- (g) *Amoralists*: There is no morality, only the satisfaction of wants (2, 10, 20, 25, 31)

Positions (d) to (g) Fishkin lumps together as "subjectivists," and it is with this conglomerate that he wishes to take issue since they pose what amounts to a meta-ethical challenge to Kohlberg's normative-ethical moral stages (preconventional, conventional, postconventional) by questioning the very basis for

making judgments in moral matters.

Fishkin reports fragments from his interviews, he says, "for the light they shed on a theoretical problem: how to classify and evaluate subjective moral reasoning" (p. 26), but his procedure necessarily restricts him to selective reporting and ultimately to employing his own logical categories--absolutism, personalism, etc. Q methodology attacks the problem operationally rather than logically by inviting people, as in Fishkin's study, to justify their moral judgments--but in this case by providing Q-sort models of their moral-judgment justifications using statements which Fishkin helpfully provides in his book. The factors which result from the composite of individual ethical justifications are the meta-ethical systems which Fishkin seeks.

To induce moral judgment, subjects were first instructed to read Kohlberg's "Heinz dilemma" (Fishkin, 1984: 5), a paragraph-long hypothetical story of a man who, for the sake of his sick wife, steals medicine from a druggist who is charging an unfair price. Subjects were then asked whether what Heinz did was right and why, and after extended discussion were asked to provide a Q-sort representation concerning how they felt they could justify their ethical judgments.

Preliminary results with only 12 individuals indicate at least four meta-ethical systems, the first three conforming in a general way with Fishkin's absolutist, minimal objectivist, and relativist categories, which illustrates that logic and operations aren't necessarily incompatible; however, the factors do not represent views which are as unambiguous as Fishkin might lead us to expect. The fourth factor was the least defined and its degree of schematization is doubtful; it is therefore presented on the next page for public scrutiny and evaluation.

## META-ETHICAL Q SAMPLE (N = 35)

- (1) I have an insufficient basis for judging others and don't believe that I should dictate to them what they should or should not do. I am only capable of

Factor D									
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	
2	11	5	6	9	1	17	10	4	
3	12	7	20	13	15	21	16	8	
27	29	25	30	14	24	22	18	23	
	32	33	31	19	26	35	28		
				34					

making judgments about judgments for myself. (2) There is no question of right or wrong apart from the satisfaction of one's wants. Morality doesn't really have anything to do with it. (3) Frankly, I can't see a distinction between a moral judgment and a matter of taste (e.g., a preference for asparagus). They are both unrationalized and purely emotive preferences. (4) There is no ultimate justification in any one system of ethics. The value that some people place on good and the value that other people place on good can be in contradiction to one another, and there is no ultimate or absolute arbiter between the two. (5) The natural light of conscience is sufficient for all great moral problems. It is universally available and provides unquestionable guidance. (6) I'm not sure what moral criteria are. I might steal a drug to save a loved one, but I'm not sure what it means to say that it's right. (7) The only justification I would seek to give my values is that they're personal preferences for ways of acting. I don't have to justify them and they don't have to be consistent. (8) I don't even know what I'm going to think a year from now, and so I wouldn't want to make any absolute judgments for anyone else. I can only say what I think would be right for me in a similar situation at this moment. (9) The obligation to follow one course of action is not canceled out by a stronger obligation to carry out a different and incompatible course of action. When moral principles are incompatible, nothing one could do would be right. (10) I just can't accept a sense of values prior to a situation because I cannot find a basis for deriving reasons: In looking for such a basis, I can't get back to something fundamental. It's all very amor-

phous.

(11) Some values are more justifiable than others. For example, as a general principle stealing is wrong, but there is no question that it is right for a man whose family is starving to steal bread to feed his family if he's got absolutely no alternative. (12) Objective moral principles are inviolable because it is always wrong to violate them. If one is in a genuine moral dilemma, therefore, there is no moral way to choose. It is just bad luck. (13) I can make up a judgment--fabricate it out of thin air and present it as "my answer," but it's not a judgment I think there's any justification for: I certainly wouldn't think that my answer is applicable to anybody else's life. (14) If you take the viewpoint that moral values are absolute in the sense of being demonstrable, moral discourse isn't really possible. (15) Even though moral judgments are matters of taste, I must confess to a need to be consistent: Indeed, I view consistency as the mark of moral reasoning. (16) I'm not sure that what I think is right is right even for myself, for in time I may not think the same way. So I'm prepared only to be wrong for myself. Certainly I wouldn't be in a state to judge for anybody else. (17) It's difficult to pronounce on moral questions in the abstract because they're always a mixture of general theoretical principles and particular circumstances, but the degree to which the circumstances do influence the principle depends absolutely precisely upon the exact circumstances. (18) Although not inviolable or absolute, moral principles are valid as "universal truths" because people are willing to affirm them and to realize that if they are subject to exceptions, it is for reasons. (19) The only defense I have to give for my conduct is that I acted in such and such a way because I wanted to--with little or no other justification. (20) We don't live by moral codes, but by a kind of "unreasoned spontaneity": I like something or not right away. There's never really a reason, because you can always contradict reasons.

(21) Moral judgments are inviolable, and it would be objectively wrong ever to permit exceptions to

them. (22) Reasonable persons may disagree, so sometimes all one can do is take a stand and stay there. One might be able to give reasons for a particular moral stand, but if I were asked whether there is a right answer always, the answer is no. (23) Other people's values are just as valid as my own: They probably have just as sound a basis as I do for acting, and I can't make any value judgment of them other than the fact that maybe I don't like what they're doing. (24) Moral judgments are absolute: They are rationally unquestionable because they are formulated in terms of principles that it would always be wrong to violate. (25) We really only have judgments of immediate want-satisfaction: If you want a loved one to live, you might have to steal a drug; on the other hand, if you want someone to die, then you shouldn't steal the drug. I would never say that one or the other course of action is right or wrong. (26) The basis of any value is arbitrary. One value may be a bit more consistent or logical than the others, or a bit more appealing to one person rather than another. But in an intellectual sense, each is as valid as any other. (27) I can say whether I think something is right or wrong for myself, but I don't think that I can judge what other people do as right or wrong. Basically, one's judgments apply only to oneself. (28) I cannot "prove" my moral values, but I can support them with arguments which I believe reasonable minds would find persuasive. (29) "Morality" is just something I feel, not something that I can justify. In fact, not only can I not justify it, I don't feel any necessity to justify it. (30) I am willing to affirm my value premises as standards for making moral judgments, but if another person makes a different assertion, it would be possible to argue about it, but there's no way I can prove the other person wrong.

(31) You cannot really decide beforehand, or in the abstract, that something is right or wrong because you cannot know what you're going to want to do until you decide it at that moment. (32) My values are subjective internal creations--creations that are justified simply by the fact that I have them. If I

say that "I value honesty," the "I" is enough: I don't have to attach a "because" at the end. (33) Given the same circumstances, if everyone followed their conscience, they would all arrive at precisely the same conclusion. (34) It's a matter of provability: There's no way of demonstrably establishing moral premises; therefore, in that sense, they are not ultimate, not absolute. (35) If, in particular situations, moral principles conflict with one another, both alternatives must be wrong. This is the definition of tragedy.

## NEWS, NOTES & COMMENT

### *Forthcoming Contributions*

William Stephenson, "Sir Geoffrey Vickers and the Art of Judgment," *American Psychologist*. This short paper, which is to appear as a "Comment," proposes that the tacit dimension in policymaking, as discussed in Vickers' *The Art of Judgment*, is transformable to operant factor structure in Q methodology, as illustrated in terms of the 1980 Iranian crisis. Employing statements from Robert Shaplen's *New Yorker* article, Stephenson represents the views of Henry Kissinger, Ramsey Clark, Khomeini, Ghotbzadeh, the U.S. press, the Common Market, and the USSR among others (including his own), and shows them to revolve around three bipolar positions, one representing a distinctly moral sentiment. The study shows "how science can enter policy-making from the masses of subjectivity always in attendance," apart from the objective facts which mediate the situation.

Stephenson is also scheduled to contribute an article--"Perspectives in Psychology: Integration in Clinical Psychology"--to a special issue of *Psychological Record* dedicated to the late J.R. Kantor. On April 5, he was scheduled to address the Ethics Committee of the Association for Education in Journalism (meeting in Columbia MO) on concept formation, using as a focal point Freeman Dyson's views on nuclear weapons (*The New Yorker*, February 1984).