

Five Dumb Ideas about Morality

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On the eve of the election, I am pleased that my fellow Democrats have finally learned not to concede “moral values” language to the other side.

In past elections, we heard a lot about “values voters”—a code-term for right-wingers on issues like abortion and same-sex marriage. Senator Obama, among his many talents, has made the case that we should all be “values voters;” that foreign, economic, and environmental policy are moral issues; and that compassion, equality, and justice are values, too.

Still, my fellow liberals often have a hard time with the language of morals—whether because of an admirable humility, a lamentable wishy-washiness, or both.

That aversion results in a number of common but dumb claims about morality and ethics. (Like most philosophers, I use the terms interchangeably—there is no “standard” distinction.) Here’s my take on these claims:

(1) **“Morality is a private matter.”** To put it bluntly, this claim is nonsense of the highest order. Morality is about how we treat one another. It’s about what we as a society embrace, what we merely tolerate, and what we absolutely forbid.

While morality respects certain private spheres—and while some moral decisions are best left to those most intimately affected by them—morality is generally quite the opposite of a “private” matter.

(2) **“You shouldn’t judge other people.”** This claim is not only false, it’s self-defeating. (If you shouldn’t judge other people, then why are you telling me what to do?)

The reason this claim sounds remotely plausible is because of a slight ambiguity in what it means to “judge other people.” Should you go around wagging your finger in people’s faces? Of course not. No one likes a know-it-all, and pompous moralizing is counterproductive.

But it doesn’t follow that we shouldn’t make any moral judgments about other people’s behavior. Doing so is often the best way to figure out what traits to emulate and what mistakes to avoid.

(3) **“I don’t need anyone’s moral approval.”** If this claim means that individuals don’t need the moral approval of any other given individual, then fine: there will always be those whose moralizing is ill-informed, sloppy or insensitive—and thus best avoided. But to deny that we need the moral approval of anyone at all overlooks morality’s crucial social role.

Morality, unlike law, does not have formal enforcement procedures: police and courts and the like. It relies instead on social pressure—encouraging glances and raised eyebrows, nudges and winks, inclusion and ostracism. (Interestingly, some right-wing bloggers have reacted to my recent work by worrying about “court-enforced moral approval”—as if that concept made any sense.)

Moral pressure can help us be our best selves. But in order for it to work, we need to take other people’s moral opinions seriously most of the time. Just as unreasonable or unenforceable laws erode our confidence in law itself (think Prohibition), widespread dismissal of others’ moral views erodes morality’s social function.

(4) **“Morality is just a matter of opinion.”** Whether boxers are preferable to briefs is “just” a matter of opinion. Whether coffee tastes better with cream and sugar is “just” a matter of opinion. To call our moral values “just” a matter of opinion, by contrast, is to ignore their social and personal significance.

The problem here is that people start with a legitimate distinction between facts and values—in other words, between descriptions of the world and normative judgments about it. Unfortunately, the fact/value distinction morphs into the much fuzzier fact/opinion distinction, which then morphs into the fact/ “mere” opinion distinction—suggesting that values are unimportant. Nothing could be further from the truth.

(5) **“There’s no point in arguing about morality.”** Moral problems are practical problems: they’re problems about what to do. “Agreeing to disagree” is fine when the stakes are low or when the status quo is tolerable. But when something is badly wrong in the world, we should strive to repair it. That often requires making a persuasive moral case to our neighbors.

My own experience as “The Gay Moralist” suggests that moral arguments can make a difference—which is not to say they do so instantly or easily. Sometimes they require an extended back-and-forth. Sometimes, they help us get a foot in the door so that an emotional connection can be made. But the idea that they never work is not merely defeatist, it’s downright false.

In short, we should all be moralists—liberals and conservatives, religious and secular, red-staters and blue-staters—because we all need to figure out how to live together.