Ilkka Niiniluoto

Improving morality — a reply to Matti Häyry

In his comment on my paper about relativism (this journal, p. 53—56), Matti Häyry seems to read too much into my few lines about moral progress. But the issues he raises are important, and it deserves to be examined whether there really are some differences in our viewpoints.

The view I have called "modest moral relativism" claims that morality is a social construction, and moral judgements (i.e., statements that something is good/bad, right/wrong) are always relative to ethical theories or human communities. But, in spite of the rejection of moral absolutism, "radical relativism" does not follow: all moral systems are not equally well justified, and immoral practices in other societies can (at least in some cases) be legitimately criticized.

This is a view that Häyry shares with me. His question concerns the ways and grounds "to criticize dubious practices in other cultures".

This question has an interesting analogy in the field of science. According to the social constructivists, scientific theories or accepted belief systems do not represent, or correspond to, some independently existing external reality. Hence, the truth value of scientific statements is always relative to theories or communities. In my view, this doctrine is in fact mistaken and based on confusions (see Niiniluoto, 1991a). Be this as it may, it is in any case interesting to ask whether such modest relativism about truth implies radical relativism ("anything goes"). Are there, for a constructivist, legitimate ways to criticize dubious beliefs in other scientific communities or laboratories?

Returning to morality, Häyry interprets me as claiming that the validity of moral criticism is *dependent* on the progressive nature of morality. In fact, I only asserted something much weaker: "unlike radical relativism, modest relativism is compatible with the idea of moral progress" (Niiniluoto, 1991b, p. 20). Here I am using the concept of progress in the weak sense:

(WP1) Some moral systems are better than some others.

To bring in the temporal connotations of progress, WP1 can be reformulated by

(WP2) Some later moral systems are improvements of some earlier ones.

This principle does not commit me to a belief in a strong "law of progress", i.e.,

(SP1) All changes of moral systems are necessarily progressive,

or to the corresponding factual claim:

(SP2) All later moral systems are in fact improvements of earlier ones.

Clearly SP1 implies SP2, and SP2 implies WP2, but not conversely. (For similar points about scientific progress, see Niiniluoto, 1984, p. 175—176.)

The weak thesis WP2 is supported, if (as I believe) the Declaration of the Human Rights of the United Nations is superior to earlier attempts to codify moral principles for humanity. This claim cannot be defended by the "progressive" nature of morality, since that would involve an appeal to the dubious principles SP1 and SP2.

If moral progress is a fact in the sense of WP2, moral regress is a serious possibility as well. Indeed, I am confident that many currently supported moral systems are much less acceptable than Aristotle's account of good human life. It also seems to me that the present-day trend of replacing the welfare state with a competitive market economy is morally regressive.

Häyry outlines three ways in which existing moral systems may be improved (see also Häyry, 1990, 1991). These methods, which I find acceptable, provide grounds for the thesis WP2. So when Häyry says that moral criticism is possible "even if moral relativism is accepted and the idea of moral progress rejected", he must refer to the strong principles SP1 and SP2. Therefore, we seem to be in full agreement with each other.

An important further question would concern the extent in which moral views in different cultures are comparable. Perhaps moral systems taken globally are in many cases incommensurable with other — in the same sense as scientific theories or paradigms may be. This may be a point where our opinions diverge, since Häyry restricts his account to local piecemeal improvements that can be justified by means of consistency and rational intuitive acceptability.

Häyry has earlier concluded that the philosophical results of applied ethics can only have the hypothetical form: "If your basic norms and values are this–and–this, and if you wish to be consistent, then you ought to do that–and–that" (Häyry, 1990, p. 13). Later he has formulated his position by saying that theories in medical ethics "can be proven to be *false*" either in absolute terms (by uncovering inconsistencies) or relative to the society where they are enforced (by showing their emotional unacceptability). On the other hand, Häyry adds, it is questionable whether such theories can be *verified* — even if they "can be improved, and genuine progress is possible in philosophical medical ethics". (WP2 again!)

Häyry's new formulation asserts that "a succesful criticism of immoral practices states in fact an absolute — if limited — *truth* concerning the relative realm of morality" (my emphasis). I find this choice of terminology a little unhappy, since it is potentially misleading. Insofar as such critical claims have the hypothetical form, they do not express substantial (categorical) moral statements, but rather can be understood as special types of valid meta-principles. (Similarly, "if you accept a scientific theory T, and B logically follows from T, then you ought to accept B; but if you decide to accept not-B, then you ought to reject something in T", is an acceptable rule for a social constructivist.) And insofar as such critical claims rely on the principle of consistency, we are speaking of the "absolute truth concerning morality" only in the sense of the coherence theory of the truth — which, at least in my view, does not define a genuine sense of truth at all (see Niiniluoto, 1987, p. 135—136).

REFERENCES

Häyry, M.
1990 Critical Studies in Philosophical Medical Ethics. Helsinki: Department of Philosophy, University of Helsinki.

Häyry, M.
1991 "Critical Studies in Philosophical Medical Ethics". Science Studies 4, 65—70.

Niiniluoto, I.
1984 Is Science Progressive? Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

Niiniluoto, I.
1987 Truthlikeness. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

Niiniluoto, I.
1991a "Realism, Relativism, and Constructivism." Synthese 89, 135—162.

Niiniluoto, I.
1991b "What's Wrong with Relativism?" Science Studies 4, 17—24.

Ilkka Niiniluoto
Department of Philosophy
University of Helsinki
Unioninkatu 40 B
00170 Helsinki
Finland