

Moral Dilemmas of Deaning

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Presidential Address

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In the eight wonderful years that I've been associated with CCAS, and gotten to know many of you, one of the things I've learned is that each one of us not only brings to deaning the perspective of our own discipline, but also each of us believes firmly that our own disciplinary training is the best possible background for the job.

Those of you who are economists are certain that no one else can understand college budgets quite as well as you do; those of you from communication feel that only you can be truly effective advocates for your college; those of you from political science claim that it takes a political scientist to survive the political battles running rampant in university administration; while those of you from veterinary science claim that only you know how to herd cats, and those of you from physics claim that only you can explain the black hole into which all the money went.

As a moral philosopher of course I refuse to take a back seat to any of you: I claim that deaning is a high moral calling, and one that on a daily basis presents us with tough moral dilemmas that strain our moral judgement to the utmost as we try to solve them in the course of our daily decisions. And of course I maintain that a background in moral philosophy provides the ideal training ground and tools for resolving these problems.

Moral dilemmas we face on a daily basis would include such issues as whether or not to keep one's commitments when the situation turns out to be different from what one expected. Do you still give your new chemistry chair the three new lines you promised when you hired her, even though your college is now facing a budgetary crunch and it has become clear in any case that the English Department needs those lines far more desperately than Chemistry does? They include questions about how forthcoming you have to be with information, and whether you can shade the truth to achieve some compelling college goal. In trying to persuade a older faculty member whose teaching is a disaster to retire at the end of this year, may you neglect to mention you've heard through back channels that the legislature is considering to make available an enhanced retirement package for the year *after next*? And these dilemmas notoriously include tough questions about how to set salaries fairly. If you provide a fat salary adjustment to one of your faculty who receives a handsome offer from a competing institution, can you in fairness do nothing about his female colleague who is equally meritorious and equally underpaid, but who for family reasons has not sought outside offers?

So as deans we face difficult moral decisions all the time as an intrinsic part of our jobs, and the answers to these questions are not simple to find. In saying this I am opposing myself to several more common points of view:

- One view is that academic administrators never consider the morality of what they do, and in fact are inherently *immoral* (you probably know a few faculty members who would be happy to attest to this point of view);

- Another view is that all deans are inherently *moral*: they know unerringly, without further reflection, which administrative decisions would be right or wrong, and they automatically choose what is right (many of us try to persuade our provosts of this point of view); and
- Perhaps the most common point of view is that academic administration is not a moral endeavor at all, but rather a strictly practical one, simply aiming to deploy institutional resources and personal skills in the most efficient manner to meet institutionally-defined goals.

I'll pass by the first two of these points of view in silence, but it's worthwhile saying something briefly about this last perspective. "Institutionally-defined goals" are not simply "givens" in our environment. There can be morally admirable goals (for example, providing top quality educations for our undergraduates, assisting our states to meet their obligations to economically disadvantaged populations, conducting research that will better the human condition), and there can be morally less admirable ones (reducing the influence faculty have over institutional decisions, or diverting our students into poor quality profit-making distance education schemes). As deans we are part of the goal-setting governance group of our institutions, so we cannot simply take its goals as a given. We must help set those goals, and we need to exercise moral judgment in selecting the ones worthy of our institution's attention. And even when the goals have been set, we remain caught up in the nexus of moral action and decision-making: if the chosen goals are morally objectionable, should we ignore this fact and simply carry on? Should we quietly sabotage achievement of these goals? Should we seek a decanal position elsewhere? And if the chosen goals are morally appropriate, there are still questions about the *means* selected to achieve them – can we, for example, pull the wool over the eyes of our department chairs in order to elicit the kind of behavior we need from them? Can we hire many of our staff on less than full-time positions in order to reduce the cost of fringe benefits? And there are questions about how to balance legitimate goals against each other when achieving one of them means setting the other on the back burner – can we increase the number of adjunct and part-time faculty, thus diminishing the quality of our undergraduate programs, in order to pull together enough money to hire the faculty stars who will give our institution the research ranking it's seeking? These are all critical, and difficult, moral decisions. No one of us can hide behind the view that deaning is a merely "practical" enterprise with no ethical dimensions to it.

Originally I planned to use this occasion to attempt to provide you with some useful ways of thinking about some of the concrete moral dilemmas we face as deans – dilemmas regarding making and keeping commitments, using and abusing the truth, and fairly allocating our college's resources.

But that was early this summer, and since then the events of September 11 have consumed our attention. Discussing these particular kinds of moral dilemmas no longer strikes me as the most valuable use of our time today.

Instead, then, I want to turn my attention to a question about morality that emerges powerfully in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, and want to use this occasion to look at this question with you in ways I hope will be helpful. The question is one we face as reflective human beings and citizens – and thus also as deans – but it is also importantly connected with

fashionable trends in academe all of us witness among the faculty and students of our colleges, so I hope that a discussion will not be amiss, although it will render the title of this talk somewhat misleading.

This question has to do with the topic of “moral relativism.” Moral relativism is the view that whether or not some act or policy is right or wrong is a *relative* matter – typically, its rightness or wrongness is relative to the norms of the culture or social group which carries out that act or policy. This view traces back to the ancient Greek pre-Socratic philosophers -- there is nothing new under the sun -- but it has become increasingly popular in contemporary thinking, especially among intellectuals and academics, over the last decade or so. The sources of this attraction are multiple, but their most authentic foundation is the disorientation that tends to occur when we encounter, in a vivid fashion, other cultures and other forms of commitment than our own, and are led to question what standing our own norms and values have by contrast with these other ways of life. Historically, as you know all too well, dominating cultures, including western ones, have often concluded that their own moral systems were obviously superior to those of other cultures, and set about trying to convert the “heathen,” by persuasion or force if necessary. But deeper and more generous thinking has gradually prevailed in many quarters. Even members of dominating cultures have come to understand, at least minimally, that other forms of social organization and other mores are as important to their adherents as ours are to us, and that we need to learn about these cultural expectations and show respect for them if we are to interact successfully with members of other societies – as we must do in a world that is becoming increasingly interlinked. People who have come this far no longer wear short shorts and tank shirts when they visit traditional countries adhering to strong norms of personal modesty. They recognize that some acts are offensive to another group in light of the group’s special beliefs, and that those acts are to be avoided out of common courtesy, even if we have no reason to accept the validity of these special beliefs beyond the group itself. Such sensitivity may lead us to avoid stationing soldiers on what is regarded as sanctified soil, to avoid appearing in places of worship without a suitable headcovering in areas where doing so is deemed offensive, and to avoid military attacks during the population’s holy days.

A second step along these lines is to realize that there are many ways to skin a cat, and that we can learn from the solutions to social problems that have been discovered and adopted by other cultures. Alternative dispute resolution – the use of non-adversarial techniques to resolve conflict, rather than turning immediately to legal suits and counter-suits as Americans are prone to do – is a movement that has rapidly gained adherence in our highly litigious society. It was partially brought to our attention as an alternative technique for resolving disputes by scholars studying techniques of conflict resolution in other cultures. We have much to learn from other societies’ ways of doing things.

But a third and more radical step along these lines is to conclude that in the end there is no valid basis to appraise one culture’s set of norms from within the perspective of another culture. On this view, each person is stuck within the set of mores learned from her own culture, cannot step outside them, and has no neutral stance from which to judge whether the norms of her culture are better or worse than the norms of another culture. This leads to moral relativism: the view that what is right or wrong for you to do is a matter of what the values of your culture mandate, and that what is right or wrong for someone else to do, like Osama bin Laden, is a

matter of what the values of *his* culture mandate.

Obviously this train of thought seems to lead to the view that there is no way to morally criticize the attacks of September 11, since they appear to be valid within the framework of a coherent cultural and religious stance subscribed to by the individuals who carried out the attacks.

As a psychological fact, of course, it's very difficult for Americans to be moral relativists in the face of the agonizing deaths of 5000 people who were innocent of any crime against the perpetrators of those attacks.¹

But academics -- even deans -- don't want to succumb to knee-jerk responses, even in the face of highly emotional events. And the idea that acts must be understood and appraised in light of the norms of the agent's own culture is an idea that can be difficult to give up. So it's useful for us to assess the validity of moral relativism as a stance for appraising the events of September 11.

Let us look briefly at what can be said for and against moral relativism.

The first thing to point out is that the alleged empirical facts that have encouraged people to adopt moral relativism may not actually support that conclusion. The alleged empirical facts are that different societies and cultures have fundamentally very different sets of values and norms, with no commonality among them. But whether or not this is true may depend on whether one focuses on what we could call "surface" values and norms or on deeper-lying ones. For example, among the Hopi, a child's maternal uncles have many of the child-rearing responsibilities that in families from European backgrounds are incumbent on the child's biological father. Within Hopi society, a biological father is free to ignore certain needs on the part of his child. To European-American eyes, then, Hopi fathers can look like irresponsible parents. At the surface, the Hopi norms regarding child-raising responsibilities are very different from the European norms. But the *underlying* norms are very similar: each culture holds that children have the right to care and guidance from a special set of adults who have the obligation to provide this care. The only difference is the set of adults who are assigned this role -- biological fathers in one case, maternal uncles in the other. It would be hard to argue that these kinds of differences in the details of social organization undermine the commonality of human value systems. In assessing how different norms are from culture to culture, we must focus on deep rather than superficial value structures. It may turn out that however different our cultural commitments are on the surface, underneath it all there is a common set of deep values which we all share, and which can be used to appraise the actions of people in cultures different from our own. A prohibition on killing innocent people stands a good chance of being one of those common values. If so, even a cultural relativist can recognize that there are limits to the differences among cultures, and find a culturally common stance from which to criticize the September 11th terrorist acts.

We also must recognize that different cultures face very different environmental circumstances, and these have influenced the norms they have adopted. The Pashtun in Afghanistan, for example, organize their lives in accordance with the Pashtu Wali, or Code of Life. One of the tenets of this Code is *milmathia*, which binds tribal members to serve a guest, including giving sanctuary to anyone who asks for it, even an enemy. (This is the law cited by the Taliban as requiring them to provide sanctuary for Osama bin Laden.)² Such extreme codes

of hospitality are not uncommon among peoples who live in very harsh environments, as the Pashtun assuredly do. In an environment where lone individuals can have a difficult time surviving by themselves, where anyone can find himself unexpectedly needing the assistance and hospitality of another human being, and where clusters of people who might provide assistance are few and widely scattered, all are better off if a strong code of hospitality holds sway, since although each may be called upon to provide hospitality to an unwelcome guest, each may need to call upon it for his own survival. In densely populated areas, or ones with more readily available food sources and friendlier climates, a code requiring automatic hospitality is less critical for the survival of all, and less likely to have been adopted. Despite this fact, individuals hailing from the more richly-endowed society are likely to believe that in unusual circumstances in which someone needs their assistance or will die, they are morally required to provide that assistance unless the cost to them is simply too high. Thus Americans have “Good Samaritan” laws, requiring motorists to stop and render aid in the event of an automobile accident — the moral equivalent of offering hospitality to someone stranded without food or shelter in the depths of winter in the Afghanistan mountains. Here again, the surface differences between two codes of ethics tend to fade when we take into account the different environmental conditions which dictate what type of code will best benefit its population, and the common underlying values served by those codes are exposed.

For the same reasons, we need to remember that the differences among the codes adhered to by different cultures arise because of different factual or metaphysical beliefs that members of these cultures subscribe to. In certain cultures, for example, it is believed that an infant’s soul does not enter its body until a substantial period -- several weeks or even a year -- after its birth. In such cultures the death of the infant before ensoulment is not seen as a tragedy of the same weight as the death of a fully-fledged human being. Many other cultures believe that ensoulment, or its moral equivalent, takes place at birth or even before, so of course members of these cultures believe that the death of an infant or a fetus is a tragic event. But what divides these cultures is their difference on a metaphysical matter – when ensoulment takes place – not their difference on a deep moral value about the value of personal human lives.

Thus for all the glaring surface level differences in the apparent values and mores of different cultures, we should not leap to the conclusion that their underlying values are radically diverse, or incomprehensible from the standpoint of other cultures. It may be that the alleged empirical foundation for moral relativism simply dissolves on closer analysis. Perhaps at heart all human cultures subscribe to a similar set of fundamental moral values, a set that is articulated differently by different groups because they have arrived at different organizational solutions to universal social issues, or because they exist under very different environmental challenges, or because they have very different beliefs about the nature of the world. If this is true, then even a cultural relativist will have to agree that there is a universal set of values in common across humanity, and which can be used by members of one culture to evaluate from a moral perspective not only their own acts, but also the acts of people who are members of other cultures.

But let us suppose the worst case scenario is true, and there is *no* such fundamental set of human values on which all human groups agree. What can be said about the resulting moral relativist claim that because different cultures have ineradicably different deep moral values, a

person's action can only be judged by the norms of the culture of which he is a member?

I, and many other philosophers, would argue that this view, when pressed, is unlikely to be a coherent one, that its attractiveness dissolves the closer one looks at it, and that it contains the seeds of its own destruction.

One difficult question for this brand of moral relativism is the question of *which* culture is to be designated as the one whose norms the individual should be judged by. Let's use Osama bin Laden as an example. Bin Laden is a Muslim. We have all heard many times by now, in the popular press as well as in the teach-ins on our campuses, that the mainstream Muslim view is that nothing justifies the taking of innocent lives, especially the lives of women and children.³ Relative to this set of norms, what bin Laden did in instigating the attacks was wrong, since the world-view of the group of which he is a member condemns the killing of innocent people. Defenders of bin Laden's actions are likely to respond to this by saying that he must be judged, not by the tenets of broad mainstream Islam, but rather by a version of the tenets of the smaller sect of Wahabi Islam to which he apparently adheres, and that *these* tenets justify his actions. But this strategy raises the serious question of which group's norms a person is to be judged by – especially since we are all members of many groups, and the norms of these groups are likely to contradict one another. The moral relativist's natural response to this question may be that the norms we judge a person by should be the norms of the community to which he gives his allegiance – in bin Laden's case, it would be the narrower sect of Islam, not the broader mainstream community. But to some degree we are all free to pick which community we adhere to. If we are a charismatic leader like Osama bin Laden or David Koresh, we even have the opportunity to *create* a new community or sect that will adopt what we believe to be the true norms. If our newly-chosen or newly-founded groups become the authoritative arbiters of what values we must be judged by, then moral relativism loses its claim to be grounded in respect for the ways of life adopted by different cultures. Instead it becomes simply the view that whether your actions are right or wrong is a matter of what norms you *as an individual* choose to live by. Such a view loses much of its attractiveness for most of us. Among other things it loses any rationale for respecting other cultures: the ugly American tourist, who chooses norms that license her to wear halter tops and short shorts when visiting traditional villages in Morocco, can no longer be criticized, however offensive her behavior may be to her hosts, because she is adhering to the norms she herself has chosen.

This form of relativism loses its intellectual foundations in another way as well. If a person's actions are to be judged by the norms she has chosen for herself, we have to ask whether there are any criteria that should *guide* the person's choice of one set of norms over another. If there are such criteria and standards, then that opens up the possibility that people can make the *wrong* choices, and adopt norms that should have been rejected instead. This possibility means that whether a person's actions are right or wrong does not just depend on what norms he happens to have chosen, but also depends on whether the choice was a defensible one or not according to applicable standards. On this view, people can be held to some kind of culture-neutral external standard in their choices -- and they can fail to meet that standard. But if so, we have essentially rejected the original idea of moral relativism, that all standards are embedded in cultures, and cannot be criticized from any external neutral standpoint. On this new view, it will be possible for members of one culture to criticize the norms of another culture if the norms

violate these standards. It will equally be possible for members of a culture to criticize and revise their own norms. An example of this is provided by Sher Zaman Taizi, a Pashtun expert and village elder among the Pashtun. He describes an alternative to armed conflict that is available to the Pashtun when one village wrongs another village by killing one of its members. Traditionally, war could be avoided by the killer's village sending to the victim's village a girl to be taken as wife by one of the villagers. But by tradition this woman is mistreated and persecuted all her life. Mr. Taizi, however, says that the Pashtun are "trying to move beyond" the custom of treating such a woman in this inhumane fashion.⁴

On the other hand, if we reject the idea that there are criteria and standards by which a person's choice of norms can be judged, then we must conclude that *any* choice is open to us, that any set of norms can be chosen and then rejected to be replaced by another, and none has any more validity than any others. In this sort of fluid situation, it becomes clear that there is no point to choosing norms at all: one might as well decide what to do without reference to *any* moral values, since if one's chosen moral values dictate an unwelcome action, one can simply discard those values in favor of more convenient ones. This is moral nihilism. But moral nihilism is also a far cry from the moral relativism with which we started, since it abandons any attempt to appraise people's actions morally by reference to the standards of their culture. On this view, bin Laden's and the terrorists' actions are *neither* right nor wrong, since there are no moral standards. Nor does this view require us to respect the norms of different cultures and their values, since on this view we are not required to do anything. A moral nihilist would be comfortable wearing tank tops and short shorts in Morocco, and bombing Muslim populations during Ramadan, but this is not what the moral relativist wanted.

This is a brief tour of moral relativism. But our conclusion should be that it is not a stable, sustainable philosophical position. Because of built-in internal tensions, moral relativism either mutates into the highly non-relativist view that there are external standards by which the norms of different cultures and individuals can be judged and endorsed or rejected -- or else it degenerates into moral nihilism, which declares the death of any moral values, and deprives us of any moral reason to respect the values and norms of differing cultures. Since moral relativism is not a sustainable position, we must either be prepared to swallow the bitter pill of moral nihilism, or we must get down to the hard work of explaining why the acts of some militants like bin Laden and the September 11th terrorists are evil, while the desperate acts of other militants, fighting for other deeply-held causes, may be morally acceptable.⁵ Such an explanation will need to be sensitive to the values, religious traditions, and aspirations of the various peoples involved. But it need not abdicate all serious thought by claiming that no culture can evaluate the acts or the norms embedded in another culture.⁶

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FOOTNOTES

1. Final estimates still vary at the time of this writing. See Eric Lipton, “Numbers Vary in Tallies of the Victims,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 2001, p. B1.

2. Rick Bragg, “Afghan and Pakistani Tribe Lives by Its Guns and Honor,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2001, p. B 5.

3. For accounts in the press, see, for example, Douglas Jehl, “Moderate Muslims Fear Their Message is Being Ignored,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2001, p. B1 and B4, and Fareed Zakaria, “Why Do They Hate Us?” in *Newsweek*, October 15, 2001, p. 24.

4. Rick Bragg, *op. cit.*, p. B 5.

5. For an account of this debate as it is emerging among Muslims, see Joseph Lelyveld, “All Suicide Bombers Are Not Alike,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 28, 2001, pp. 49 ff.

6. For helpful comments on earlier versions of this address, I am grateful to Douglas Blair, Alvin Goldman, and Barry Qualls.