"If the social reality is organized around the cute/dork dichotomy, then there are cute girls and dorky girls, and it would be a mistake not to recognize this. This is important social knowledge. But at the same time it is tempting to say that the cute/dork dichotomy is an illusion. It is socially and morally problematic and because it is reified through a pattern of belief and expectation, it could be undermined by a refusing to have beliefs in its terms. More generally, in cases such as this we seem to be able to generate a contradiction: it is true that p so you should believe p; but believing p makes it true, and it would be better if p weren't true; so you shouldn't believe p."

Sally Haslanger

Relativism of Social Truth and its Ethical Implications

I. Introduction

Questioning our socially constructed truths are one of the main features of modernity. Many may fear for good reason the recognition of relativity of social and ethical truth, especially while looking at historical examples of societies adopting "evil" moralities. In this essay I will argue that even if complete relativism of social truth may both sound logically and morally problematic for some, the answer to it does not lie in recognising some ultimate standard of truth. Instead, I will propose a reinvestigation of the notion of "Grundnorm" articulated in the works of legal philosopher Hans Kelsen. Through this, I will attempt to clarify what I would hold to be the role of ethics in light of the hardships highlighted by Sally Haslanger.

Before proceeding to establishing my claims highlighted above, I would like to make a brief note on the aspect from which I see the issue. "Social truth" is a broad term which may refer to several different things. However, - partly due to the limited scope of this paper - I will mainly treat the term "social truth" to refer to normative truth of a given established normative system in a society. This also seems to me what the author means in the quote. I will do more to unpack this claim later, however this implies that when I already talked of relativism, it referred to the relativity of moral or other normative truths. (I make more specific remarks on the use of my vocabulary in section VI.)

II. Is there a limit to moral relativism?

Looking through the different normative systems in distinct cultures, one may find it hard to deny that circumstances affect moral imperatives. The discovery of the moral and cultural rules among Eskimo societies in the 1960s was widely used by

anthropologists and moral philosophers to support this claim. The fact that Eskimos found it morally admissible (among others) to kill their children after being born may well suggest that moral rules only exist in a given way if people have the needed amount of reasons to uphold them. Should the circumstances require, the normative truth that "the life of infants is invaluable" ceases to exist (or at least becomes much weaker).

But does it follow that there is no moral truth? No, it does not. As the widely repeated thought experiment says: "You and I may disagree on whether the earth is flat, but it would certainly not mean that it has no shape at all." This may be true, but I think one needs much more than this to prove that there is some sort of absolute standard of truth due to which people should believe some social truths, while not believe others.

Philosophy must start with as few assumptions as possible, which in our case is this: (A): 'Normative systems of social truth exist in societies because they have certain reasons towards upholding them.' Ever since we think in a secularised way (at least in the fields of sciences) this is the starting point from which we could start our investigation of the nature of social truth. One either has to deconstruct it, or/and show a better alternative to it. In what follows I will show that neither a sufficient deconstruction nor a better alternative was shown, at least from an ethical viewpoint.

III. Deconstructing (A)?

Many fear "evil" moralities with good reason: the terrible events of the last century opened the eyes of people that certain societies can indeed be convinced to hold normative beliefs, which can even lead to the terrible massacres such as those led by the Nazis or the Soviets. Respectively, there are many philosophical attempts, partly deriving from this fear of relativism, aiming to refute this relativism. I will deal with possibly the two most common ones: (a) holding truth to be some ultimate standard to which some could be closer or further, and (b) an appeal to the logical invalidity of relativism.

(a) Karl Popper among others aimed to show that even if we may never know what actual ethical truth is, we may still presuppose that there is a notion of truth, to which different ethical claims may be closer or further. We could therefore test the premises of certain moral imperatives, and develop better and better techniques of finding out whether they correspond to facts. My issue with this claim is this: even if it may be true in science that we can make closer and further approximations to reality, such makes little sense in ethical judgements. For the existence of the kind of reality science aims to discover is independent of our reasons, ethical judgements are not. Therefore, it makes little guidance for anyone to say that ethical judgements should

always be judged based on their correspondence to facts, since they do not rest on facts, but on social reasons to uphold them. Instead, one can safely acknowledge the fact that ethical truth exists on society's terms (even if it makes sense if they are to some extent logically valid and correspond to facts, as that is what makes them easily understandable), and therefore one should make moral judgements while considering for what would one's community may have common reasons towards upholding.

(b) Francis Beckwith on the other hand aimed to deconstruct moral relativism by calling it self refuting. For the claim that "there is no truth" is logically incoherent, as it fails to satisfy its own criteria of truth: if there is indeed no truth, then the statement itself must still be true, while if there is truth, then it is simply false. The issue with this claim is that it makes complete nihilism identical to moral relativism. Very few relativists would ever argue that there is no truth at all, for it has very little to do with what they are arguing. Instead - at least in the kind of relativism I will defend - they see different kinds of social truths as valid only within their own system. This argument, however needs much more unpacking, and that is what I will do in the following.

IV. Arriving to Kelsen's "Grundnorm"

Now I have arrived to establishing the real kind of relativism I am arguing for this essay. I have already stated that unless one can sufficiently deconstruct (A), this is the minimal assumption one should stick with in secularised ethics. Obviously, an alternative secular viewpoint could be to show that normative systems are completely natural, and thus need no further justification (since they derive from our human nature). We can find such remarks in the writings of John Finnis, however his appeal to "findings of anthropologists" makes it much less convincing from the philosophical point of view. For if philosophy relied so much on changing scientific consensus, it would make little sense for it to exist besides empirical science. That is why I think that (A) is the ground from which one could start a philosophical investigation, as it requires the least possible assumptions to be made on human nature and the nature of morality.

There may without doubt be several issues with the application of (A), a very illustrative of which can be found in Soren Kierkegaard's dilemma of Abraham. Abraham is faced by the following issue: 'God commands him to kill his son. Abraham is aware that there is an ethical principle not to kill his son. Which of the two orders should he then follow?' Kierkegaard's solution is a religious hierarchy between different kinds of imperatives, out of which the command of God shall always prevail. Closer readers of Kierkegaard would definitely have better formulated this, but for my part I (in following John Gardner) would picture this dilemma as a

mere moral one, which may well be accepted by anyone looking at it with no belief in divinity whatsoever.

In order for someone to find a normative order obligatory (to hold its "social truths" true) one should somehow recognise its validity, in order (as put in the quote) *"to have beliefs in its terms"*. This is what I will call "Grundnorm" (G), by applying the methodology used by Hans Kelsen for legal analysis. (G) is the most basic norm of a given normative system which only exists hypothetically. Its purpose is merely to give validity to all the rest of the norms within that normative system, and its recognition means that you will hold them (morally) binding (or true). What Abraham thus faces, is a conflict of two different normative systems, hence he have recognised two distinct (G)s. Should they conflict (as in this case they do) Abraham has to resolve the moral dilemma by choosing one system over the other.

V. What are the merits of this analysis?

Now I would clarify the main three reasons why I find this analysis desirable. First, it shows that normative systems of social truth are only valid from the inside, if one recognises its (G). From the outside they can simply be viewed as a system with no validity whatsoever. This makes the possibility, as Gilbert Harman suggested, to condemn other systems of social truth for what they are, as it would make little sense to make moral judgement on them within your system of truth. To be more precise: it would make much more sense to claim that the morality of Hitler was primitive and evil, than to claim that Hitler ought not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

Second, it does not deny that one may well have different reasons for upholding a system of social norms, by recognising its (G). Obviously, one may argue that certain reasons are legitimate while others are not. What I would claim is, that usually it is necessary that these reasons are at least morally neutral within the normative truth system of the given order. For instance, rarely do we condemn when one feels to have moral obligation for her friend, even if her only reason for having her as a friend was that she enjoyed her company. I believe that the main reason for this is that systems of social ordering do not have to have rules for all walks of life, merely those which the community as a whole has reasons towards regulating. Such derivation is only found illegitimate, when one upholds a source of obligation or social truth (the most fundamental one, again, is (G)) for severely immoral reasons.

Finally, as I have stated already, it gives ethical guidance to the reader without making unfounded assumptions. The main issue with which this paper had to deal with is the reason for holding any social truth true. For centuries, the answer to this was the sacralisation of one system of truth, should that be divine truth in Kierkegaard or "scientific" analysis of society among the Marxists. This may be a

solution for ordinary people unable to decide what to hold true and what not, however I believe the reason for many serious social catastrophes was the inability to see the bigger picture. One can realise that different systems of social truth may exist given that people find reasons to uphold them through the recognition of their (G). Even if you cannot blindly hold things true, you may still rationally recognise (G) as a criterion for social truth, as you believe it is what brings flourishing to you and your community. Instead of holding your system of social truth either worthless or absolute, you can simply realise the reasons you have for upholding it, and judge other systems of social truths similarly.

VI. A new role for ethics

As already stated in the introduction, this essay has aimed to grasp the issue of the nature of social truth from an ethical standpoint. I hope that this did not make my vocabulary too confusing, as I have used the terms "moral" and "ethical" as synonyms for social truth which society upholds for certain reasons it has. Obviously, we mostly use such terms to refer to partly different things: a social truth may for instance be that "human life is valuable", while an ethical derivation can be that "killing without justification is wrong". Nevertheless, I hope that the partial neglection of this distinction does not confuse my main massage: no matter how one calls these normative systems, what is important is that (A) applies to them. This was the subject matter of this essay.

Some may argue that the theory I have defended on the nature of morality is not even ethics, as a discipline does not have to define its own subject matter. Respectively, it is common to refer to philosophers as G. E. M. Anscombe or Philippa Foot as meta-ethicists. I believe that philosophical disciplines should not be understood that way, as claims on the nature of morality have just as much relevance for moral judgements (therefore the interest of ethics) as mere claims within a single morality.

It is no secret, that for long philosophers of ethics have payed less interest towards understanding the actual nature of morality. Even when Kant or the utilitarians formed concepts on the nature of morality, those were hardly observations, but rather normative views on morality to justify their own imperatives. The main aim of my essay was therefore to show how one can receive guidance for taking morality and other systems of social truths for what they are: recognised means of social ordering. This may both save us from the dangerous consequences of societies seeing their systems of social truth as absolute (as most radical 20th century ideologies did), and help make more meaningful judgements on other such systems (as stated in section V).

VII. Conclusion

In this essay, I have aimed to reflect on the interpretation of Sally Haslanger, which I find to have the most important ethical implications for a contemporary person. I have held social truth to refer to the values of normative systems of different societies. Accordingly, I have started by an investigation of moral relativism, and argued that anti-relativist claims are hardly defensible from a secular philosophical perspective. Instead, I proposed to understand different systems of social truth through their hypothetical source of validity (Kelsen's Grundnorm in a broader sense), which one may recognise for several different reasons. I hoped to demonstrate that by this relativistic understanding we can still give guidance to our actions.