Towards a Principled Conventionalism

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Conventionalists have long been accused of lacking principled methods to deal with moral disagreement. I take conventionalism to be the thesis that whether a moral code is binding is determined by societal acceptance. In this context, binding indicates a non-optional, normative force. The objection from moral disagreement can be understood as follows: If normativity is a function of societal acceptance, what about societies which traffic in radically divergent moralities? It turns out that it is not only possible, but an empirically supported fact, that what is considered right in one society is considered wrong in another.

A traditional conventionalist answer is that moral codes are relative to the societies in question and that such disagreement is illusory. However, such a response is deeply unsatisfactory. It entails the rejection of inter-societal criticism, claiming that there is no disagreement to address. This appears to be particularly counterintuitive in cases where societies reject the moral consensus of the international community (e.g. societies which disregard basic human rights).

This paper suggests an alternative answer in order to address this issue. By definition, if conventionalism is true, then individuals are bound by the moral codes of the societies they belong to. This claim can be generalized to a principle where the individual is a special case: Sub-societies are bound by the moral codes of the societies they belong to. If a set of individuals is a subset of a larger society with a determinate moral code, then by this principle the sub-society is also bound by this code. This generates a nesting of societies, where the lower levels are bound by the moral codes of the higher levels. For any given society, the morality of that society must be consistent with all the societies which contain it.

This principle allows different societies to evaluate each other. Since different societies are sub-societies of larger ones, the shared moral codes (i.e. those which are binding on both societies) act as a basis for moral criticism and debate. This can even function on a national or international level, where regional moral disagreement may be resolvable by appealing to moral codes binding the disagreeing societies. This principle acknowledges that normativity is generated by societal acceptance while, simultaneously, providing tools for moral engagement between societies.

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