

Question 2; 'It is plain that what different societies view as moral or immoral – as ethically right or wrong – has differed greatly at various times and various places. It is therefore futile to seek for a rational, objective basis for moral judgements.' - Comment on this claim.

The Collins English Dictionary (CED) entry for morality is -

- 1) concerned with, or relating to human behaviour, especially the distinction between good and bad, right or wrong and
- 2) adhering to conventionally accepted standards of conduct.

And immoral as

- 1) transgressing accepted moral rules
- 2) unscrupulous or unethical
- 3) profligate, promiscuous.

What may have at one time been considered immoral behaviour may now be acceptable behaviour, or at least now tolerated. Certain actions and behaviours in England were considered by the church to be a sin, and this was supported by the state and laws were enacted to prevent immorality. For the purpose of this essay four incidents of changes of attitude and the laws that have been repealed or amended are examined as a result of change of attitude. It may be noticed that there were some significant changes of attitude in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly in the sixties and seventies, when many traditional values and social norms changed.

- 1) Homosexuality was frowned upon and the practice of it was illegal until the passing of the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 that decriminalised its practise for consenting adults over twenty-one years of age, (this Act has since been amended). At around this time the word 'gay', which normally meant to mean to be carefree and merry, now mostly meant to be homosexual though 'gay' did historically refer to the gay dress worn by prostitutes (male and female) to get noticed. The word 'gay' is sometimes used in a defamatory manner. The practice of homosexuality may have been decriminalised but those deemed 'gay' were often frowned upon and discriminated against. It is now more acceptable to be 'gay' and there are now specialised organisations and laws to prevent discrimination. However this does not mean that these people are wholeheartedly accepted by society.
- 2) To attempt suicide was once illegal, and even family members, if the attempt was successful, could be prosecuted. The church authorities at that time considered suicide as self murder and Thomas Aquinas (1224 to 1274) and St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo Regius (354 to 430), theologians and philosophers, held the view that anybody who so disgraced a life given to them by the Creator showed the utmost disregard for for God and that the act of suicide was a sin. However, by the early 1960's the Church of England reconciled its views, considering prevention and guidance a more moral stance. The Suicide Act of 1961 decriminalised suicide.
- 3) Child labour during the industrial revolution in the UK was a normal and accepted (and legal) practice (though it may not have been considered moral). Various Acts of Parliament, made possible by the great social reformers of the 19th century, now bans the use of child labour and it is now considered immoral. Child labour is still widely used in some parts of the world and companies have been boycotted for trading in goods produced by foreign child labour.
- 4) Slavery, even in the UK, was deemed socially acceptable and moral. In America

slaves were legally classed as property and their owners could treat them as they pleased. Now there is world-wide condemnation of slavery and it is now outlawed in the developed world.

This begs the question 'was slavery approved by the church?' A rudimentary analysis of the views of Thomas Aquinas neither approves or disapproves of the practice. Thomas, in one of his many efforts to reconcile his thoughts in line with the Church held the view that slavery was a sin and should not be practised although in the 'second intention of nature' slavery was approved if that slavery resulted from sin, but in the 'first intention of nature' there would have been no sin and therefore no slavery. The Church at the time agreed with the legality of slavery but neither approved or disapproved of slavery at the time of Thomas of Aquinas but subsequently the the Roman Church did disapprove of the practice slavery.

Schopenhauer thought that morality was not discovered but created, whilst Nietzsche described morality as a fiction, but a necessary fiction that man could not live without. Morality has been considered an illusion on two accounts -

There are significant variations between the moral codes of different countries and religions, and different periods of history. These variations so J L Mackie posited, signified that there were no universal standard of morality and moral codes merely expressed different ways of life. To support this view in a modern context one could consider slavery in the deep south of America. Slavery was (then) normal, moral and a necessity. So at that time, and in that world, slaves, and slave ownership was morally justified. In his second argument he posits that morality is 'queer', it is not like anything else in the universe. Morality cannot be touched, seen or interacted with, so it cannot exist. To sum up – he considered morality like a system of law and is perpetrated by the church and the state. Those who are religious may hold the belief, and would be ordinary and understandable, that to be moral is to be in unison with God (Christian) or to enter paradise (Islam).

There is generally accepted view that morality is a necessity for mankind to flourish so although an abstract form, it does exist and to lead a good and just life means living by a moral code and it is certain that this moral code will, by inductive reasoning, change and change at a faster rate as society and technology advance and secularism increases.

Problems can occur for the first time when considering new dilemmas brought about by technological advances and the realignment of the moral issues of the day. We now have the ability to see into our genome and genetic structure – the DNA and double helix of life - and it may soon be possible to eradicate genetic diseases by altering the God given DNA but this will certainly lead to moral issues – the most obvious being the rights or wrongs of allowing 'designer babies' to be conceived. At the moment it would appear reasonable to eliminate hereditary disease at conception but then is this already the beginnings of 'designer babies'?

In summary then the moral code can different for other people and places. As western societies have become more secular, moral codes have changed – what was once acceptable is no longer acceptable. Where laws have changed, e.g. for suicide, is this an upgrade or downgrade of the moral code that we all need?

It is therefore justifiable and possible for a rational and objective moral judgement to be

made for and within a society at the time of judgement, although one societies moral code may be diametrically opposite another.

It is in this manner that secular societies have become more liberal. The church and the state (government) are two different entities. At one time in England the Church was also the state. In other parts of the world religion is a way of life and the law and these societies still condemn practices that are now acceptable in the west. But these moral compasses can change. If the people will it, it can happen.

This reaffirms the CED statement on the meaning of morality ...adhering to conventionally accepted standards of conduct...