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I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

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Comments (Optional):

Convincing, clear and beautifully written — this is an excellent paper.

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Fallen World Ethics and Third World Politics

Moral rules vary according to situation in appropriateness, justice of application, and moral force. While such language may sound reminiscent of the doctrine of cultural relativism, my assertion is that for any given situation there exists a set of best possible moral rules, none of which are necessarily found within the culture's belief system. That is, I propose an underlying principle, which I will state as frankly as possible: Morality consists in trying to make the world a better place.

The goal of agriculture is to produce food. We judge the goodness of a system of agriculture by its ability to be sustainable, produce high yields, and make efficient use of resources. In arid regions, a good agricultural system involves plots arranged for easy irrigation. In mountainous terrain, terracing is used to prevent erosion. Though neat, even rows of plants on temperate plains allow machinery to easily reap massive yields, we would be foolish to state that farms should be arranged in the same manner in all climates and geography.

Why then should we expect morality to consist of the same rules across situations? The underlying goal of and standards for morality are universal, but moral rules are dependent upon the soil on which they grow. Universal moral rules would only make sense in

a world where the human situation was likewise universal. Yet, we have a tendency of making our moral rules pervasive, holding them across time, applying them across continents.

This tendency is tempered by another, more fundamental desire—to justify the status quo. Nietzshe's examination of the origins of Christian thought in slave morality and Kierkegaard's critique of the bourgeois Christianity show that the Christian life and the moral life are often a matter of interpretation. The requirement to give up one's riches and pick up one's cross was substituted for an easy, comforting religion, where being saved is simply a matter of professing one's faith and asking forgiveness from an all-loving God. A powerless and impoverished people created a morality that valued meekness and poverty. A rich and content people worship a God that apparently requires little more than prayers and perhaps ten percent of a lavish income.

It is not my purpose here to butt heads with religion, but to challenge our contentment with the status quo. It is a commonly held view that actively causing harm is of a higher degree and kind of infraction than allowing harm, that one is obliged to not do the former but not the latter. However, I assert that we actively create or support values in our society and are therefore responsible for their consequences. Any system of moral rules that serves to maintain the status quo is unethical in a world where we know some suffer.

Here too is included such noble principles as the Buddhist law to do no harm. We may think ourselves passive, sympathetic creatures for following such a rule. Yet, we follow the rule actively, giving free reign to those who do not follow our rule to lay harm to others. We are obliged to either abandon our rule and penalize the corrupt or to stubbornly adhere to it while the powerless suffer. Both options involve an active choosing. To claim to be both a passive and sympathetic person is hypocrisy.

Such rules are often justified by the concept of universal action. Many moral rules, be they secular, Christian, or Buddhist, might very well create a utopia if followed by everyone everywhere. Common sense, however, rips any theory of universal morals to shreds. We know that rules will not be followed universally, that they will be abused, disregarded, and corrupted. As a result, some will suffer. There is a necessity for action, to correct, enforce, and reform. We must create our moral rules in light of the fact that we live in an imperfect world.

While I advocate judging moral rules by virtue of their consequences, utilitarianism fails to address the problem. Moral rules based upon the maximization of pleasure or happiness do little more than reflect the values of the majority. It is possible for societies to adopt deleterious values. We can blissfully drink the wine of Bacchus while we are torn asunder. We can play fiddles while our cities burn. We can be rich, powerful, and happy and follow the Romans to their destruction. Utilitarianism is valid

only insofar as it stays focused on the big picture and predicates pleasure and happiness to improving our state of affairs.

II.

I believe a good philosophical paper is not a mandate of truth, but a stimulant for productive conversation. As such, it might be helpful to reveal the origins of our thoughts. Mine came from a six-month journey through Central America and numerous doses of culture shock, the least of which was not my return to the United States. When one encounters intelligent people of different cultures who hold beliefs dissimilar to one's own, cultural relativism becomes very tempting. On the other hand, traveling through a region that has been the test grounds for social and economic policies ranging from dictatorship to democracy, socialism to capitalism, the site of numerous revolutions and counter-revolutions, it soon becomes clear that not all beliefs result in neutral consequences.

Arguing that we base our morals upon working towards a more perfect world begs the question, what would a perfect world be like? I had opportunity to spend a few days with the Kuna Indians of the San Blas islands off the Atlantic coast of Panama. Despite conversion to their own brand of Catholicism and a few pieces of technology such as gasoline motors for their canoes and the occasional electric generator, the Kuna have miraculously maintained their way of life and social independence from the

mainland. To the eye of the tourist, San Blas is kind of island paradise. More importantly, the Kuna seem to agree.

As one might imagine, land is a very limited resource for an island community. For this reason, it is publicly controlled, as are other necessities such as housing, healthcare, and education. The protected coral reefs that surround the string of tiny islands provide an abundant source of food. A feast of lobster, crab, and tuna lies only a few meters from shore. While land is publicly controlled, the coconut trees that grow there are privately owned. Limited capitalism is allowed on commodities not essential to life, such as coconut trade, hosting of tourists, and sale of crafts.

These are not the choices of a backward people lost in time, but carefully chosen polices to preserve their way of life. The gentleman whose family I stayed with was fluent in four languages. His daughter was in Panama finishing up medical school. Such things are apparently not extraordinary amongst the Kuna.

Of course, the San Blas life is not everyone's idea of a perfect world, but it does contain many essential components, such as food, shelter, healthcare, and education for the entire community as well as the freedom and leisure time to pursue other interests. Clearly this way of life is facilitated by their unique situation: abundant food supply, social and military protection provided by the mainland, and a homogeneous population with common interests. However, the San Blas paradise is more than a draw of luck, it is sustained by thoroughly considered, wise laws.

Crime is practically non-existent because the Kuna work to insure that there is no need to commit crimes. The necessities for life as well as the education and resources needed for the enhancement of that life are freely given. A fair and just council settles all disputes. Laws are made and important decisions are considered by the entire community, men and women alike. Because the society has been so successful and because each member is an active participant in this success, the youth of San Blas are likely to follow the example of their parents.

The severity of punishment reflects the great value the Kuna place on maintaining their way of life. Murderers are buried in the same grave as their victim. "Ni un loco va a matar," not even the crazy are going to kill, my host told me. Other serious infractions are punishable by exile. My informant laughed at the idea of prisons, noting how prisoners rarely return to society reformed—placing criminals amongst other criminals only makes them better criminals, not better citizens. The Kuna focus their energies on preventing crime from occurring in the first place.

III.

In such a society as that of San Blas, absolute moral rules and their strict enforcement make sense; but they are justified by virtue of their situation and are not likewise valid in ours. Consider some of the necessary differences between morality in more and less perfect worlds. In an imperfect world, society,

environment, and genetics may adversely affect behavior. If we eliminate the negative aspects of these factors in a more perfect world, free will is the only variable that could cause wrongdoing. The Kuna share a common genetic heritage, a favorable environment, and a model society. As such, most infractions can only be attributed to an act of free will.

In a close-knit, peaceful society such as that of San Blas, motivation for a crime is easily traced back to the original infraction. In more imperfect worlds, motivations are often much more complex. Innocence and guilt are harder to establish. Individuals may need to break rules in order to avoid harm to themselves or others. Insofar as individuals do not freely place themselves in such situations, society bears the burden of guilt for allowing the possibility that moral rules come in conflict. For instance, if society allows a man to be born into poverty and provides no means for him to avoid starvation other than thievery, it would be ridiculous to state that the man is guilty and society is innocent. If a society wishes to make its laws absolute and infractions punishable, it is obliged to insure that no two moral rules conflict, an obligation the Kuna take seriously.

So, am I suggesting that we attempt to adopt the San Blas model at large? --Certainly not. Just as moral rules must be made to fit a situation, it should be clear that a utopian model must do likewise. Pure democracy, for instance, would be an organizational nightmare for any sizeable nation. However, nearly every political

system found in the world today is workable in a perfect world, it is merely a matter of the degree of trust we place in our leaders and ourselves. If an individual was endowed with an extraordinary degree of wisdom, intelligence, justice, and kindness, we could imagine a utopia ruled by such a benevolent despot. If everyone were sympathetic, peaceful, and capable, a form of anarchy might serve us best. Representative democracy is an interesting mix, relying both on conscientious voters and honest officials.

Economics are more dependent on the external environment. In a world of unlimited resources pure capitalism allows for a high degree of freedom; but as resources become more and more limited, this freedom can have disastrous results. Only in the past few decades have we begun to realize the magnitude of the problems caused by our inherited frontier morality. The world we once thought of as an endless supply of raw materials and a bottomless dumpster for our wastes has begun to show the signs of a history of abuse. The division of wealth is startling, but even more alarming is the fact that our world economy relies upon a large foundation of penny wage laborers to provide us with the cheap materials and products upon which the First World thrives. Multinational companies own huge proportions of land in countries where unemployed peasants must illegally squat on land in order to eek out a living.

IV.

Morality in a perfect world merely consists of maintaining the current state of affairs. Insofar as our world is imperfect, applying perfect world moral rules to our situation is at best ineffectual. At worst, enforcement of perfect world morals in an imperfect world is unjust. The social contract provides a good test.

In the social contract, morality consists of following rules that benefit society, while taking advantage of the rules to profit oneself is considered immoral. Grave harm or disproportionate disadvantage to an individual, however, negates this obligation. We do not expect a person to follow a rule without sharing in its intended benefits.

We cannot expect a Guatemalan peasant to honor property rights when he owns no property of his own. We cannot expect Central American revolutionaries to respect an economic system of capitalism that returns their hard work with pennies while the rich get richer at their expense. We cannot expect the indigenous peoples to obey laws that exclude and oppress them. These people have a right to steal, a right to claim land, a right to revolution. And these people live not only in Central America, but all over the world.

The consequence is that our middle and upper class values are threatened. We are called upon to make a choice: abandon the rules, apathetically watch as people struggle under or against them,

violently enforce obedience, or work to change the world such that the rules are fair. To enforce unjust rules is clearly unethical. In addition, they are ineffectual. If a man steals in order to eat or kills in order to survive, what good does the threat of punishment accomplish?

Insofar as the struggle is just, we must be prepared to abandon a number of our rules. However, as some of these rules are necessary for a more perfect world, we are obliged to take a more active stance. We cannot be content to be apathetic or sympathetically passive. We are required to be political activists and charitable donors.

How much are we required to give? Is individual responsibility based on the principle of universal action? Do we give and act to the degree that if everyone did likewise problems would be resolved? If we truly desire a better world, we will have to do more.

In conclusion, consider for a moment what life would be like in an utter dystopia, a completely immoral world, where everyone is concerned merely with personal gain. Our world is at risk of falling to such a base state. Our moral rules lose more and more force the deeper we drop. The line between right and wrong is being smudged into a gray blur. In our world, even the most noble principles of peace and passivity are guilty of perpetuating the decline.

If we were to hit bottom, how would we climb back up? In a world of selfishness, would we not be fools to be anything but self-serving too? No, to rebuild a better world some must be willing to be self-sacrificing, to set the good example, to give until it hurts. Our current situation is not nearly so dire, but the ledge we stand on is tenuous. Do we take the easy path and allow ourselves to plunge or dig in our fingers and climb?