

Title:

Ethical Relativism and Absolute Taboos

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Summary:

Taboos regulate our sexual conduct, race relations, political institutions, and economic mechanisms.

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Article Body:

I. Taboos

Taboos regulate our sexual conduct, race relations, political institutions, and economic mechanisms.

Jews are instructed to ritually cleanse themselves after having been in contact with a Torah scroll.

In Polynesia, where the term originated, says the Britannica, "taboos could include prohibitions on eating certain foods."

Political correctness in all its manifestations ~ in academe, the media, and in politics - is a form of taboo.

II. Incest

In contemporary thought, incest is invariably associated with child abuse and its horrific, long-term effects.

Incest is the ethical and legal prohibition to have sex with a related person or to marry him or her.

Incest is also forbidden between fictive kin or classificatory kin (that belong to the same matrilineal or patrilineal group).

Moreover, the use of contraceptives means that incest does not need to result in pregnancy and offspring.

Nor is the taboo universal. In some societies, incest is mandatory or prohibited, according to local customs.

The more primitive and aggressive the society, the more strict and elaborate the set of incest taboos.

Freud said that incest provokes horror because it touches upon our forbidden, ambivalent emotions.

Edward Westermarck proffered an opposite view that the domestic proximity of the members of the same family leads to a natural aversion to incest.

Both ignored the fact that the incest taboo is learned - not inherent.

We can easily imagine a society where incest is extolled, taught, and practiced - and out-breeds itself.

III. Suicide

Self-sacrifice, avoidable martyrdom, engaging in life-risking activities, refusal to prolong one's life.

But while suicide is chiefly intended to terminate a life ~ the other acts are aimed at perpetuating it.

Life's meaning - the outcome of active selection by the individual - is either external (such as wealth or power) or internal (such as knowledge or love).

Henry Sidgwick said that only conscious (i.e., intelligent) beings can appreciate values and make choices.

If suicide is a statement, then society, in this case, is against the freedom of expression. It is a violation of the social contract.

The suicide violates not only the social contract - but, many will add, covenants with God or other supernatural beings.

This paternalism was propagated, centuries later, by Sir William Blackstone, the codifier of English law. Paternalism, a malignant mutation of benevolence, is about objectifying people and treating them as objects. The possession of a right by a person imposes on others a corresponding obligation not to act in a way that would infringe on that right. The paternalists claim counterfactually that no competent adult "in his right mind" will ever voluntarily surrender his rights. Paternalism is a slippery slope. Should the state be allowed to prevent the birth of a genetically defective child? Suicide is subject to a double moral standard. People are permitted - nay, encouraged - to sacrifice their lives for a noble cause.

IV. Race

Social Darwinism, sociobiology, and, nowadays, evolutionary psychology are all derided and discredited. Moreover, the discussion of race and race relations is tainted by a history of recurrent ethnic cleansing. The irony is that "race" - or at least race as determined by skin color - is a distinctly unscientific concept. Still, many human classificatory traits are concordant. Different taxonomic criteria conjure up different "races". Granted, racist-sounding claims may be as unfounded as claims about racial equality. Still, when we consider the following two hypotheses:

That the IQ (or any other measurable trait) of a given race or ethnic group is hereditarily determined.
That the IQ (or any other quantifiable trait) of a given race or "ethnic group" is the outcome of environmental factors.

Both theories are falsifiable and both deserve serious, unbiased, study. That we choose to ignore the first theory is a failure of scientific inquiry. Claims of the type "trait A and trait B are concordant" should be investigated by scientists, not by ideologists. Thus, medical research shows the statement "The traits of being an Ashkenazi Jew (A) and suffering from Tay-Sachs disease (B) are concordant" is true. The statements "people who are Jews (i.e., with trait A) are (narcissists)", or "people who are Jews are (racists)", are false.

V. Moral Relativism

Protagoras, the Greek Sophist, was the first to notice that ethical codes are culture-dependent. But ethical or cultural relativism and the various schools of pragmatism ignore the fact that some moral principles are universal. Still, it is easy to prove that most taboos are, indeed, relative. Incest, suicide, feticide, and abortion are all relative. Incest is likely to be tolerated in a world with limited possibilities for procreation. Suicide is likely to be tolerated in a world with limited possibilities for escape. None of them reflects some objective truth, independent of culture and circumstances. They are relative.