
Opinionator

THE STONE

Why Our Children Don't Think There Are Moral Facts



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George Washington, depicted here taking the oath of office in 1789, was the first president of the United States.
Fact, opinion or both?

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What would you say if you found out that our public schools were teaching children that it is not true that it's wrong to kill people for fun or cheat on tests? Would you be surprised?

I was. As a philosopher, I already knew that many college-aged students don't believe in moral facts. While there are no national surveys quantifying this phenomenon, philosophy professors with whom I have spoken suggest that the overwhelming majority of college freshmen in their classrooms view moral claims

as mere opinions that are not true or are true only relative to a culture.

What I didn't know was where this attitude came from. Given the presence of moral relativism in some academic circles, some people might naturally assume that philosophers themselves are to blame. But they aren't. There are historical examples of philosophers who endorse a kind of moral relativism, dating back at least to Protagoras who declared that "man is the measure of all things," and several who deny that there are any moral facts whatsoever. But such creatures are rare. Besides, if students are already showing up to college with this view of morality, it's very unlikely that it's the result of what professional philosophers are teaching. So where is the view coming from?

A few weeks ago, I learned that students are exposed to this sort of thinking well before crossing the threshold of higher education. When I went to visit my son's second grade open house, I found a troubling pair of signs hanging over the bulletin board. They read:

Fact: Something that is true about a subject and can be tested or proven.

Opinion: What someone thinks, feels, or believes.

Hoping that this set of definitions was a one-off mistake, I went home and Googled "fact vs. opinion." The definitions I found online were substantially the same as the one in my son's classroom. As it turns out, the Common Core standards used by a majority of K-12 programs in the country require that students be able to "distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text." And the Common Core institute provides a helpful page full of links to definitions, lesson plans and quizzes to ensure that students can tell the difference between facts and opinions.

So what's wrong with this distinction and how does it undermine the view that there are objective moral facts?

First, the definition of a fact waffles between truth and proof — two obviously different features. Things can be true even if no one can prove them. For example, it could be true that there is life elsewhere in the universe even though no one can prove it. Conversely, many of the things we once "proved" turned out to be false. For example, many people once thought that the earth was flat. It's a mistake to confuse truth (a feature of the world) with proof (a feature of our mental lives). Furthermore, if proof is required for facts, then facts become person-relative. Something might be a fact for me if I can prove it but not a fact for you if you can't. In that case, $E=MC^2$ is a fact for a physicist but not for me.

But second, and worse, students are taught that claims are *either* facts or opinions. They are given quizzes in which they must sort claims into one camp or the other but not both. But if a fact is something that is true and an opinion is something that

is believed, then many claims will obviously be both. For example, I asked my son about this distinction after his open house. He confidently explained that facts were things that were true whereas opinions are things that are believed. We then had this conversation:

Me: "I believe that George Washington was the first president. Is that a fact or an opinion?"

Him: "It's a fact."

Me: "But I believe it, and you said that what someone believes is an opinion."

Him: "Yeah, but it's true."

Me: "So it's both a fact *and* an opinion?"

The blank stare on his face said it all.

How does the dichotomy between fact and opinion relate to morality? I learned the answer to this question only after I investigated my son's homework (and other examples of assignments online). Kids are asked to sort facts from opinions and, without fail, *every* value claim is labeled as an opinion. Here's a little test devised from questions available on fact vs. opinion worksheets online: are the following facts or opinions?

- *Copying homework assignments is wrong.*
- Cursing in school is inappropriate behavior.
- All men are created equal.
- It is worth sacrificing some personal liberties to protect our country from terrorism.
- It is wrong for people under the age of 21 to drink alcohol.
- Vegetarians are healthier than people who eat meat.
- Drug dealers belong in prison.

The answer? In each case, the worksheets categorize these claims as opinions. The explanation on offer is that each of these claims is a value claim and value claims are not facts. This is repeated ad nauseum: any claim with good, right, wrong, etc. is not a fact.

In summary, our public schools teach students that all claims are either facts or opinions and that all value and moral claims fall into the latter camp. The

punchline: there are no moral facts. And if there are no moral facts, then there are no moral truths.

The inconsistency in this curriculum is obvious. For example, at the outset of the school year, my son brought home a list of student rights and responsibilities. Had he already read the lesson on fact vs. opinion, he might have noted that the supposed rights of other students were based on no more than opinions. According to the school's curriculum, it certainly wasn't *true* that his classmates deserved to be treated a particular way — that would make it a fact. Similarly, it wasn't really true that he had any responsibilities — that would be to make a value claim a truth. It should not be a surprise that there is rampant cheating on college campuses: If we've taught our students for 12 years that there is no fact of the matter as to whether cheating is wrong, we can't very well blame them for doing so later on.

Indeed, in the world beyond grade school, where adults must exercise their moral knowledge and reasoning to conduct themselves in the society, the stakes are greater. There, consistency demands that we acknowledge the existence of moral facts. If it's not true that it's wrong to murder a cartoonist with whom one disagrees, then how can we be outraged? If there are no truths about what is good or valuable or right, how can we prosecute people for crimes against humanity? If it's not true that all humans are created equal, then why vote for any political system that doesn't benefit you over others?

Our schools do amazing things with our children. And they are, in a way, teaching moral standards when they ask students to treat one another humanely and to do their schoolwork with academic integrity. But at the same time, the curriculum sets our children up for doublethink. They are told that there are no moral facts in one breath even as the next tells them how they ought to behave.

We can do better. Our children deserve a consistent intellectual foundation. Facts are things that are true. Opinions are things we believe. Some of our beliefs are true. Others are not. Some of our beliefs are backed by evidence. Others are not. Value claims are like any other claims: either true or false, evidenced or not. The hard work lies not in recognizing that at least some moral claims are true but in carefully thinking through our evidence for which of the many competing moral claims is correct. That's a hard thing to do. But we can't sidestep the responsibilities that come with being human just because it's hard.

That would be wrong.

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