

Paper Title: Collision of Epistemological Frameworks: Religion and Social Science's Unshared Understanding of Ethics

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Abstract:

Religious scholars and social science experts frequently differ, and sometimes clash, when writing and discussing issues of ethics. I suggest here that persons on both sides of the debates possess significant unshared understandings on fundamental world-view issues. Moreover, until progress is made on these fronts—hope for unity on ethical topics is dubious.

First, religious scholars and social scientists differ in how they understand the construct of truth. The difficulties (or impossibility) of aptly grouping all religious scholars and all social scientists into two categories notwithstanding, I argue that religious scholars—generally—believe that some type of truth is absolutely knowable. Moses may have come down with two tables of stone, or Mohammad may have scribed a holy writing, or Joseph Smith may have penned divine words while seeing through God-given glasses. But in some manner, a body of truth exists that was provided outside of normal human ken.

Social scientists, in contrast, view truth in terms of empirical observations. In this paradigm, truth is understood in terms of probabilities. If observations are found to be accurate, say, 95 out of 100 times ($p < .05$)—then social scientists generally understand these findings as truth. Humanism, rather than divine revelation, is the basis of knowing truth to social scientists.

Moreover, to religious scholars, particularly with fundamentalist leanings, which represents the majority of religious followers world-wide, find some type of truth to be absolute. The teachings of a Great One may be considered sacred in need of orthodox interpretations. To the social scientist, in contrast, truth is relative. What they observe today may be different from what they observe tomorrow. Consequently, social scientists and religious scholars lack a solid shared foundation for overlapping epistemological understandings.

Upon these divergent understandings, religious scholars and social scientists part further in understanding ethics, since the construct of ethics is based on truth-notions. To the religious scholar, ethics involves discussions of what is morally right and wrong. The practicing social scientist, in contrast, discusses ethics in terms of rules by which professionals in a field have agreed to abide. The *American Psychological Association*, for example, establishes a code of ethics. However, this code is not a moral code. Psychologists do not speak in terms of rightness or wrongness of their actions. Rather, they address behaviors that have empirically been found associated with ill-fated consequences. Unlike the religious followers, who would view violation of a code as immoral, social scientists speak in terms of breaching legal agreements.

What steps should be considered toward perceptual mergings? I will develop the following: Do not assume meanings, define meanings when communicating, think on levels-of-understanding rather than linear, portray mutual respect, attempt to phenomenologically view one another's world's, and holistically dialogue, looking for natural connection points.

Biography:

Michael Firmin is professor and chair of the psychology department at Cedarville University in Cedarville, OH. He has taught full-time in higher education for 16 years, including a former position as Graduate Studies Director. Firmin is an Ohio licensed psychologist and *National Certified Counselor (NCC)*, possessing three master's degrees and two Ph.Ds. His most recent doctorate is from Syracuse University in Syracuse, NY. Seminary educated, he is ordained and a former pastor. Firmin has over 50 conference presentations and journal publications, is a member of *Psi Chi* (national honor society of psychology), and included in *Who's Who in America*.

Paper:

Collision of Epistemological Frameworks: Religion and Social Science's Unshared Understanding of Ethics

Religious scholars and social science experts frequently differ, and sometimes clash, when writing and discussing issues of ethics (Bullis & Mazur, 1993; Collins, 1991; Osmo & Landau, 2003). This particularly is the case in social science settings where legal authorities have taken the issue from theoretical to quite practical and economic realities. For example, psychologists, professional counselors, marriage & family therapists, and social workers now have licensure laws regulating the practice of professional practice in all or nearly all 50 states. When the social scientists establish laws which include codes of ethics that must be followed by all practitioners, including those with religious affiliations and beliefs, Levicoff (1991) notes that the stage is set for both philosophical and litigious conflicts. The present paper is an attempt to analyze where the foundational differences exist between the religious scholars and the social scientist, then move toward some reconciliatory suggestions.

I suggest here that persons on both sides of the debates possess significant unshared understandings on fundamental world-view issues. Moreover, until progress is made on these fronts—hope for unity on ethical topics is dubious. The unshared perspectives exist on two fundamental points. The first relates to defining the construct of truth. The second relates to how both sides understand the concept of ethics.

The organizational structure of this paper follows. I provide an overview of how both religion and social scientists come to understand the construct of truth. Then I proceed to show where the collision occurs as these two systems intercept. The topic of truth is addressed since it is the foundational underpinning for ethical understanding. Then I provide overviews regarding how religious scholars and social scientists possess differing views on how to appropriately understand ethics and where the collision occurs between their two views. The paper concludes with reconciliatory suggestions.

The Construct of Truth

Truth to Religious Scholars

To at least some degree, we are the products of our training. Religious scholars most often come from seminary training backgrounds, at least in Western traditions. Further, seminaries typically follow a philosophical foundation relative to epistemology and means of knowing truth (Sutton, 2000). Some religious traditions, for example training for becoming a Jesuit priest, even require philosophy as part of the preparatory curriculum. Evangelical pre-seminary programs in both Bible colleges and liberal arts institutions also either require philosophy coursework, or integrate the background into the curriculum (Pearcey, 2004). Non-Western religions, in a variety of modalities, also tend to base their beliefs on theoretical or deeply-rooted philosophical perspectives.

Truth, from a philosopher's vantage point, is a theoretical matter. That is, truth is a construct to be understood from logical and metaphysical perspectives (Skurnik, 1998). From this vantage point, truth possesses universal properties. It possesses requisite qualities such as being consistent, rational, and universal (Hocutt, 1994). In this tradition, religious scholars tend to understand truth to be similar to that portrayed by the philosopher, only adding a supernatural, Deistic, or spiritual dimensions (De Kesel, 2004).

The point I am making in this paper is not to pigeon-hole how all philosophers or religious scholars understand truth. I completely understand the wide spectrum of beliefs and am only painting with wide brush strokes. What I wish to drive home is the contrast. That is, the fundamental foundations from which religious scholars come to understand truth is very far and different from how social scientists view this construct, as will be discussed subsequently.

Truth to Social Scientists

In contrast to the speculative model of the philosopher/religious scholars, social scientists are empiricists. Social scientists are educated by the scientific method. As such, while not generally being extreme positivists, most social scientists have been educated in traditions where truth is known via empirical investigation (Knapp & Earnest, 2000). General psychology textbooks, for example, define psychology as the scientific study of human behavior and cognitive processes. While psychologists are unable to watch the mind work, research is focused on observable outcomes through stimulus-response [S-R] measurements (Hunt, 1993).

Truth is known by social scientists, in this context, by placing people into control groups and experimental groups. Variables are held constant, with one component in an experiment manipulated at a time. Truth is held to be the statistically significant differences found between the controlled conditions. This scientific method is essentially identical to that of the hard sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.), except social scientists apply the method to people, rather than friction, chemicals, cells, and the like (Bernstein, Penner, Clarke-Stewart, & Roy, 2005). In short, social scientists are trained to think like—scientists. As such, they understand truth in scientific terms (Montero, 2002).

Social scientists also conduct research using qualitative research. This includes methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and collecting field notes. Such ethnomethodologies differ from the scientific method, but share the same fundamental core. Namely, they are empirical methods (Stafford & Stafford, 1993).

Social scientists conducting research generate conclusions inductively, reporting truth in terms of what they observed in studying the people groups under observation (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 2002).

The Clash in Perspectives

In light of the above perspectives, religious scholars and social scientists clash since truth is seen as absolute or relative. That is, religious scholars generally believe that truth is knowable. Moses may have come down with two tables of stone, or Mohammad may have scribed a holy writ, or Joseph Smith may have penned divine words through God-given glasses. But in some manner, a body of truth exists that was provided outside of normal human ken (English, 1994).

This supernatural revelation of truth will be interpreted in philosophical perspectives by most religious scholars (Hicks, 1995). That is, consistent with the philosophers' perspectives, if truth is revealed by a Holy One, then it will possess qualities such as universality, consistency, and rationality. It will not be truth today and then tomorrow or some other day cease to be truth (Payne, 1985).

For the social scientist, in contrast, truth generally is thought of as being relative (Chandler, 2000; Wallace, 1988). There is no knowledge outside of that which can be observed or measured. To social scientists, science (not religion) determines truth (Gergen, 2001). Moreover, what science today considers to be truth may change as new data is generated and old findings are shown to be invalid. There is no problem for social scientists understanding truth in this manner. Society and people change over time. Consequently, what truth was discovered at a given point in time is considered valid for that occasion. As people change, then scientists will observe and record those changes—and truth will change accordingly. In other words, social science truths shift as people shift in their behaviors and measurable reactions (Haig, 2002).

In sum, religious scholars and social scientists may use the same nomenclature at times when discussing the construct of truth, but in reality, they possess divergent understandings on the matter. This is important because truth is the basis for building an ethical framework. If a Holy Being revealed a principle that should be understood as authentic, then right behavior (ethics) should be consistent with this truth. However, to the social scientist there is no universal reality (Davidson, 2004). Truth is understood in social contexts, depending on patterns observed by clusters of shared culture groups. Truth to one cultural group may legitimately differ from truth to another group—even those respective truths are mutually exclusive to the other (Hocutt, 1995; Markham, 1995).

If divergent notions of truths were where the issue ended, then there likely would be no significant clashes between religious scholars and social scientists. There would be debates, for sure, and much intellectual dialogue would no doubt occur. However, the real clashes occur since both religious scholars and social scientists wish to influence human behavior (Picchioni, 1995). Life is regulated. Whose perspectives dominate the rules and laws of society? For centuries, the religious scholars' perspectives provided the template for ethical decisions in courts, legislatures, and professional codes. The winds of time have changed direction, however, at least in Western civilization. Consequently, the stage is set for the next discussion—based on what I presented to this point regarding truth—as both sides address human behavior and establish ethics codes. The clash will

occur, in part, because both sides lack a solid shared foundation for overlapping epistemological understandings.

Construct of Ethics

Ethics to Religious Scholars

Religious scholars tend to view ethics in terms of moral rightness and moral wrongness (Hare, 1995). As such, people are thought of as possessing internal computer chips (if you will) that have pre-programmed instructions about righteousness. The instructions etched inside the chips contain instructions for people to engage in certain behaviors and to refrain from other behaviors. Religious scholars, by and large, would argue that these directives were placed there, directly or indirectly, by a Supernatural Being. And the codes used for these instructions are consistent with the Being's revelation regarding truth.

As a concrete example, take adultery. A Roman Catholic Bishop might say that a client and therapist should not commit adultery. It is immoral to do so. In light of the truth principles revealed by God in the Bible, engaging in such behavior is inconsistent with the internal programmed instructions (guilt results) and forbidden by the religious code of ethics. This matter of truth is universal and should be consistent across all cultures. As such, it is not the context of the therapist/client relationship which makes the behavior wrong. It breaches ethics because the action violates truth and it is morally wrong.

When religious scholars speak of ethics, generally they refer to the rightness or wrongness of societal or personal decisions. For example, they discuss the ethics of euthanasia, the ethics of abortion, the ethics of genocide, the ethics of birth control, and so on. The context tends to be the overall morality of the matters (Rae, 1995). How should truth, as revealed by a Supreme Being, best be applied in regulating—or in establishing ethical rules—the actions of society? Select a random set of conferences, books, journal articles, or the like in the circles of religious scholars. Most will address moral qualities of behavior, philosophically addressed, when referring to ethics.

Ethics to the Social Scientist

Ethics to the social scientist is of a qualitatively different nature. Social scientists are concerned with self-governing rules for themselves as a profession (Anderson, 1996). Whether Confucius revealed truth about the moral appropriateness of various actions lends no consideration to social scientists when writing an ethics code. Rather, they are concerned with how research shows various behaviors to affect others, either positively or negatively (Stein, 1990).

Consider the above example of adultery. Social scientists (e.g., counselors, social workers, marriage & family therapists, etc.) forbid adultery between a therapist and a client. Unlike the religious scholar who condemns it based on lack of moral virtue, the social scientist forbids the practice because empirical studies have found such actions to result in complex consequences, producing discomfort to clients. There is no universal truth involved with the rule. Rather the code of ethics simply reflects the nature of the data available at this time.

A few decades ago, there was no prohibition in the codes of social scientist ethics for therapists and clients to engage in sexual activity. Today they disallow it. However, it is entirely possible in future decades for adultery to again become completely acceptable in therapy. As society changes, peoples' mores change and the reactions that

clients viscerally experience as a result of sexual practices may result in an alteration of the ethics code. Also, it is entirely possible that social scientists in non-American cultures where sexual behavior is more open may choose not to forbid such practices. This variability simply reflects the cultural experiences empirically observed and measured by the social scientists. Unlike the religious scholars, there is no absolute truth that should be applied universally to all social scientists (Abbinnett, 1998; Casper, 2001).

In sum, social scientists understand ethics in terms of a set of rules that a group of people make (governing bodies) to which all members of the group are expected to obey. Failure to obey these rules results in expulsion from the group, and perhaps legal consequences. Ethics, in principle, have no organic connection with morality other than a clinician's desire for possessing virtuous characteristics (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1998). Select a random set of conferences, books, journal articles, or the like in the circles of social science ethics. Most will address rules by which professionals must abide in order to avoid measurable, unpleasant reactions of clients. They have little connection with what philosophers or religious scholars would consider to be classical ethics.

The Clash in Perspectives

At various points, the worlds of religious scholars and social scientists intercept. When such overlap occurs on the topic of ethics, friction sometimes results (Ohlschlager & Mosgofian, 1992). While reasons for such conflict are wide and varied, with no one etiology, I purport that sometimes it is due to unshared values relative to the construct of ethics (and the underpinnings of truth).

Sometimes this discord occurs because social science ethics codes do not contain prohibitions that religious scholars believe should be embedded into such rules (Tjeltveit, 1997). For example, the American Counseling Association permits sexual relations between former therapists/clients two years after the termination of therapy (with stipulations). Religious scholars view this as sanctioning immoral behavior. They say that adultery is wrong in all contexts, since a Divine Being revealed truth in this regard. On other occasions, religious scholars complain that social science ethics codes forbid behavior that should be considered [morally] ethical (Zur, 2005). For example, the American Association of Marriage & Family Therapists forbids connection with a present or former client outside of the office therapeutic context. Religious scholars indicate that such fellowship is part of normal spiritual relationships and aides in emotional healing. Evangelical Christians such as Tan (1991) and Kellemen (2004) claim that what the AAMFT considers unethical due to dual relationships, the Bible deems to be living a healthy Christian life.

On the flip side, sometimes rubs occur between religious scholars and social scientists because the latter objects to the ethical teachings of the former. For example, many religious scholars consider homosexuality to be sin (Collins, 1995), whereas the social science ethics codes forbid discrimination based on sexual orientation. In addition, social scientists sometimes react negatively when religious scholars teach permissive activity when it is condemned by social scientists as being unethical. For example, many religious groups actively permit spanking of children (Dobson, 1992) but the National Association of Social Workers disfavors such activity and for social workers to do so in their professional positions is unethical.

What occurs, then, are situations where morality and ethics may be at odds for religious scholars and social scientists? Some will consider various activities to be immoral, but ethical (e.g., sex with a client after two years have expired). In other situations, behavior may be moral, but unethical (e.g., dual relationships with a client). The situation is complex to begin with, but it is sometimes exacerbated when religious scholars attempt interaction with one another on these issues—and they do so from completely different frames of references (e.g., no shared basis for truth). Even further problems occur when the two factions use the same English terminology (e.g., the word ethics) but do so with very different denotations.

Towards Remediation of the Clashes

Following are four consideration points for both religious scholars and social scientists toward remediation the clashes that sometimes occur regarding the nature of ethics. First, do not assume meanings. Given the material discussed above, both religious scholars and social scientists need to minimize the number of suppositions that they bring to dialogue. When I speak to an American adult citizen using the English language, there are certain matters that I naturally assume. In other words, we seldom begin with blank slates when communicating with others. It is normal course of the communication process to make particular assumptions when engaging others in interaction.

In this matter, however, I suggest that religious scholars and social scientists attempt to keep the assumptions to a minimum. Beyond semantics, the two groups of people have different philosophies that undergird how they come to think and understand the concept of ethics. Therefore, before making statements—both sides should not assume that the other will share these same foundations—and try crafting careful statements that do not presuppose the other party comes from the same perspective.

Second, both religious scholars and social scientists must define meanings when communicating. Semantics are important for all effective communication. This is true with both denotation and connotation. Given the divergent backgrounds of religious scholars and social scientists, however, this is particularly salient for members of these two groups. Begin with the fact that that the word ethics simply does not have the same meaning when read by differing populations (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 1998). The same is also the case for the word truth (Hautala, 1982).

Sometimes when social scientists speak of truth, for example, what they really mean is factual data (Hocutt, 1994). That is, at the time of writing what is stated is believed to be factual. Using this terminology can make the statement much more palatable to the philosopher/religious scholar. The word “fact” does not tend to conjure-up notions such as universality, consistency, or rationality—as often does the word “truth.” It does not take much effort to use word substitutions, and at times, the efforts can be quite valuable when mutual communication results.

Likewise, when religious scholars speak of truth to social scientists, sometimes they might substitute terms such as belief, dogma, or revelation. The social scientist may better receive these concepts as apt in the context of religious discussion. Using the term truth, apart from empirical validation or corroboration, may sometimes only bring up unneeded defenses or arguments.

In short, sometimes religious scholars and social scientists may need to translate (so to speak) the ideas they are attempting to communicate into the language best

understood by the recipient—even if that language is foreign to the speaker. This is particularly essential when using the term ethics. Religious scholars are advised to use synonyms such as morality, mores, or values. This portrays the principled undergirding of the construct. Likewise, social scientists may better use words such as rules, policies, or codes rather than the term ethics. These better portray the fluid nature of social science ethics and that they are man-made guides which are intended to change over time.

Third, religious scholars need to think on levels-of-understanding when communicating with one another regarding the construct of ethics. Linear thinking assumes that all ideas exist horizontally and one idea must consequently lead to another in a logical fashion. All facets of the discussion must be consistent and without contradiction. However, I propose that religious scholars and social scientists must avoid this type of conversation when communicating about ethics.

Rather, they need to understand that concepts can be understood from multiple perspectives, depending on the assumptions of the communicator. When religious scholars, for example, reference the Dali Lama or another religious leader, there may be levels of messages embedded into the communication. For example, the social scientist may not accept the Dali Lama's theology, but may find some of his religious statements to be factually accurate (truthful). Thus, is the Dali Lama speaking truth??!! The question must be answered on multiple levels, and attempts at portraying a reply to the question on a linear plane only would be imprudent.

As mentioned previously, behavior can be understood as ethical, but immoral; and it sometimes can be immoral, but ethical. Consequently, black-and-white thinking causes more communication problems than necessary when religious scholars and social scientists interact. Sometimes, obviously, behaviors also can be ethical and moral. The point is that the two groups need to understand that there is not one set of principles or guidelines that they both share when communicating about ethics. Both sides need to think deeply and see the complexities involved with ethical discussions. Before making judgments, both sides need to try and examine all potential angles of the matter at hand, realizing that truth sometimes may be contradictory, may not always be consistent, and may not be universal—if understood differently from the traditional philosophical meanings of the concept—and the same is true with ethical principles and codes.

Fourth, I suggest that in order for religious scholars and social scientists better to connect, they need to exercise mutual respect. This can be more difficult to accomplish, in reality, than the simple logic of the statement might imply. Everyone likes to be right. Further, intellectual strongholds are deeply embedded into how both religious scholars and social scientists think. If graduate education is successful, then members of both groups will possess pathos for how they understand respective constructs. Giving-up comfortable cognitive sets that intuitively makes sense and with which one communicates to colleagues regularly is more difficult to do than what might at first be apparent.

Natural desires are for the members of the other group to convert their lingo to our own. However, with both sides digging-in little genuine communication or dialogue likely will occur. Mutual respect requires that both religious scholars and social scientists work at phenomenologically viewing one another's worlds. I purport that neither side has the complete and total correct perspective regarding the construct of ethics. There are

kernels of truth in both camps. In one sense, there is no new conflict occurring. The core ideas of Plato (philosophy/religious scholars) and Aristotle (empirical social scientists) are in vogue. In that sense, resolution between religious scholars and social scientists likely will not occur any time soon. However, the debate presently is playing itself out with high-stakes-consequences relative to the lives of people who practice religion and those served by social scientists.

Advanced progress between these two professional worlds will require more than mere semantical translations when communicating to one another. Rather, it will take a spirit of genuinely wanting to understand the other side—then respectfully assessing the others' views from their vantage points—and looking for points of natural connection. Not only is this possible between intelligent and reasonable professionals, it is also necessary. The persons served both by religious practitioners and by social scientists deserve the greater good that comes from cooperation—not antagonism—by their intellectual leaders. I believe that understanding the concepts outlined in the present paper, followed by a spirit of desired collaboration will, reduce tensions, avoid collisions, and move toward better working alliances.

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