

Matilal as Metaethicist

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Abstract: Bimal Krishna Matilal (1935-1991) was an Oxford-educated Indian philosopher. He is best known for his contributions to logic, but he also wrote widely on metaethics. Unfortunately, the latter contributions have gone overlooked. Engaging directly with foundational figures in metaethics such as Gilbert Harman, R.M. Hare, Bernard Williams, and Philippa Foot, he defends a view he dubs *pluralism*, a middle position between relativism and absolutist realism. Unlike the relativist, he argues that there is a genuinely universal morality; unlike the absolutist, he argues that there are multiple, but often conflicting and incommensurable, moral frameworks and ideals.

In defending this view, Matilal draws on sources in classical Indian philosophy such as the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the Buddhist Pāli Canon, and Jain thinkers. Matilal thus serves as a critical point of contact between Indian thought and contemporary Western metaethics.

Though his chief aim is to discredit increasingly-popular forms of relativism, in doing so he presents the broad outlines of his pluralistic view, of which *Dharma* morality occasionally is held up as a model. Morality, he claims, operates on two levels. On the surface level we find particular, socially-embedded norms. These vary across cultures and can give rise to incommensurable systems, as there is often no trans-cultural standard by which to compare them. (Here, his argument draws significantly on Quine and Davidson.) He argues, however, that this does not render other cultures unintelligible or uncriticizable. If incommensurability does not interfere with admiration or respect, it need not interfere with criticism either.

On the deeper level, the “fabric of morality” consists of universal and genuinely true moral principles. These are wrapped up with rationality itself and the shared situation of embodied humans. To support this universality, Matilal offers both *a priori* and empirical considerations. First, there are limits on how much different systems could vary and still be called ‘moral’ at all. (It is interesting to note the development of this argument alongside expressivists’ similar remarks.) In this vein, he argues that just as science cannot be completely value-free, ethics cannot be completely fact-free. Some commonalities must be shared by moral systems for them to be intelligible as such.

Second, for empirical support, he emphasizes the universal acceptance of general norms of non-harming and truth-telling. These may vary in their application, but at the fundamental level are universal. This, he acknowledges, leaves room for empirical inquiry: If a culture could be found that had a moral system, but lacked any norms of truth-telling, we would have to change what we take to be the essential fabric of morality.

Finally, he offers compelling methodological criticisms that prefigure some positions in the Moral Twin Earth debate. He repeatedly criticizes Bernard Williams and others who use highly abstracted and unrealistic examples of different, isolated cultures and their norms. Real cultures, Matilal argues, are dynamic. They interact and develop through time in complex and reflexive ways. When we keep this in mind, the abstracted claims about relativism and the theoretical and moral clefts between cultures become much less plausible.