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Th151 Written Finals

1. Relativism [moral relativism, secularism and pluralism]

a. In your own words accurately define/describe the concept of relativism (which includes moral relativism, secularism, and pluralism).

In my own understanding of relativism is that it is an act of conceding or accepting the idea that there is no absolute truth, but rather, truth is a personal experience where one is just as valid as the other. It refers to the person and his infinite capacity to experience the world around him and hereby formulate his own conclusions in which is to be presumed completely valid, taking into account the multiplicity of human perception among other considerations.

One of these considerations is moral relativism, which is a philosophical standing that tackles the issue of right versus wrong, rather than just truths. It accepts the proposition that what one person may find morally right may not be the same for other people. Take for example the multitude of religions that espoused from the same Bible. There are fundamental disagreements that can arise from the same set of facts, but its validity is protected by the personal nature of such philosophy, that so long as it is true and right to me, therefor it is true and right.

A resolution to this dispute is the introduction of secularism which is more of a political statement rather than a philosophical one. It highlights the separation of church and state in that one may not directly interfere with the business of the other (e.g. the clergy may not dictate what laws the State should enact, likewise, the State may not force the Church what kind of God to teach). It applies to relativism (or which could be called relative secularism) noting that the absolute truth has no concrete foundation in reference to morality, thus political action must be taken with logic which is necessarily secularized, which in my opinion is a way of making decision without having to directly refer to one’s moral obligation as a means to justify the said action.

Pluralism is a concept I have already touched on above, but I would like to clarify some more. I have understood it to be a concept of multiple realities and such a definition fits perfectly with relativism, since the philosophical foundation of relativism is given weight by pluralism. They differ in that the former refers to absolute and relative truths, or focuses on the human experience, while the latter tackles the outward universe, the stimuli, in that there exist an infinite amount of possibilities that is perceived uniquely as there are relative to the number of the people experiencing it.

b. Benedict describes relativism as a “modern dictatorship.” Explain the inherent contradiction(s) within relativism. Illustrate your answer with one or two examples (either an example from history or a current issue in our own generation).

Arising as not merely a dictatorship, but could be tantamount to a modern “religion”, relativism has been a strong challenge against dogma, doctrines and long established principles of the faith. Relativism directly confronts these learnings about God and the world by insisting a philosophy that there is no absolute truth, thus the Scripture is not absolute truth or rather, the combined enlightenment of the Magisterium is of no direct relevance to the faithful, because the “truth” is up to him. It removes the Church from the hearts of men and supplants man as the king of his own realm.

The contradiction lies in that if we allow a society where every person is a relativist, then it will undoubtedly produce chaos and disunity. Imagine a society where there is no higher moral standard, where it is personalised, if this happens, what is the point of having laws? Or a government? Or parents to rear their children? Of faith? If we allow relativism, in its rawest point, one man may feel that he shouldn’t steal or kill from another person, but if someone else thinks that he shouldn’t steal, but killing is just fine, then what is stopping that person from doing so? If relativism tells us that every tribe, culture and person should and has a unique way of ascertaining right from wrong and should be accepted completely, then why do we think that it is wrong to cut off a man’s hands if he steals a loaf of bread?

To provide an example, let’s look at a brief history of racism. The apartheid was justified or can be justified with relativism, that because a group of powerful white men think that they can oppress people according to colour of their skin because they rely on the relative truth that they are the more superior race. Or the acts of Adolf Hitler, because he thought that Germany should rule the world over and promulgate his concept of the supreme Arian race, and so on and so forth. This was only cured with the International Declaration of Human Rights. The former was a product of allowing individual relative truths to be turned into political machines, the latter was the product of absolute truths espoused from the collective experience of human suffering grounded on moral, religious and social concepts. Relativism fails to understand that though man absorbs the world through personal experience, he does not do so in a vacuum.

2. The Gospel of John

a. Briefly explain the purpose why the Gospel of John was written and where (reference) this purpose is stated in the book (this could be done in one or two sentences).

As a personal perception as to the inspiration behind the Gospel of John, is that it can be found in John 1:14. It is the making into flesh, the Word of God, the recording of John’s experience of divine enlightenment so that it may be shared and lived out.

b. Explain the meaning and significance of John’s Prologue (1:1-18).

We can explain the significance of the prologue in two ways, one is on the aspect of literary impact, and the next is on its divine purpose.

On the literary impact of the prologue, there is a premium on the dramatic value of by which it is presented. It highlights the greatness of God through constant examples and reiterations. It pays homage to the “true author” of the work, in that the world, all the way to the Words of John’s gospel came from and through Him. It is a dramatic, historical recounting of God as according to John.

As to the divine purpose of the prologue, it highlights the fact that the Words that we shall experience from here on out are not that of man, but words that come from holy transcendence, that they are God’s words made flesh and that John was a catalyst and not the author, that he was a witness and not the creator. A divine disclaimer, so to speak, of the how, who and why of the Gospel of John.

c. Explain the meaning and significance of Jesus’ statement, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” (7:37) and “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (8:12). In your answer try to address the following: is there any Old Testament background to these statements? If so, what are the implications of Jesus’ statements? Is there any sense of “fulfillment” and or “replacement”?

John 7:37 is directly related to the verse in Isaiah 55:1, while John 8:12 refers to multiple passages, but all with the common theme of the escape of the Jews from Egypt. What this entails then is the fulfilment of a promise, a recognition of God’s covenant to his people, that He has sent his Word in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ to answer their prayers and lead them to salvation. Jesus is the physical representation of God’s word. The sense of “fulfilment” is a product of the renewal of the covenant made by God to the Jews he made his promise to. And rather than referring to His Word made flesh as a replacement, I think the term “represent” is more apt in defining the divine role of Jesus Christ.

**Thank you Sir Hutchison for a great and enlightening semester! You are one of the teachers that, I really feel, cares for the learning and well being of his students, through good discussion and great opportunities to build on grades, and for that I thank you. I wish for you to have many more great teaching semesters filled with great students! I will forever remember you as one of the teachers that made my last gruelling semester in the Ateneo bearable. ☺**