

MORALITY AND GAMBLING

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Why Morality? Unspoken Arguments

- Half the world has a view that gambling is WICKED/SINFUL/IMMORAL/AND OUGHT not to be DONE
- The other half thinks gambling good, harmless fun which is THRILLING, RELAXING AND COOL
- The third half of the world doesn't care much at all

Both halves are right

- Sin is bad: Gambling is sinful because you ought to work for what you get and you ought not to risk becoming an addict - which may well ruin your (and your family's) life here and now (as well as after you're dead and in Hell)
- Freedom is good: People should be allowed to spend their own time and money in entertainment of their own choosing, even if others think their choices, such as gambling, foolish or wicked

Thesis: Gambling debates pretend to be empirical but are really moral

- How dangerous/addictive is gambling?
- How good/bad is gambling for taxes?
- How good/bad is gambling for children?
- How does gambling render/does not render our neighbourhoods more unsavoury?
- How does gambling encourage the stupid/feeble-minded/weak-minded/greedy to be even more stupid/feeble-minded/weak-willed/greedy than they already are – etc. etc.

Proof of thesis

You can predict people's judgements about the empirical questions if you know their views about the question of whether gambling is intrinsically immoral

So why *do* we think gambling is/is not immoral – or just yucky?

- Definitely not the same question as whether gambling should be banned/restricted.
- This questions is: Why do they think people shouldn't do it all, period?
- Or that the less gambling there is in the world or in our society the better?
- Conversely, why don't we view gambling like eating chocolate, or skate-boarding, or playing bridge all of which can cause similar harm to playing roulette?

The General Vice Hypothesis?

But

- Eating: you can't not eat
- Smoking: giving up gambling doesn't make you live (probably) longer
- Exercise (which may well cause you injuries)
- Sex: (it's good for you)
- Etc, etc

Evolution: So why do we think gambling is immoral/unsavoury?

- Suppose there were no rules about sex in any society we know of: everyone could seek maximum pleasure without any responsibility.
- Such a society would, until recently, have died out.
- Now suppose that such a society had no rules about money. What people owned and earned had no connexion with desert (however defined).
- Such a society might survive but would not prosper

The Immorality of Gambling Hypothesis

- So my hypothesis is this: we have deep moral misgivings (in a Durkheimian sense) about gambling in most societies because gambling flagrantly flouts the rule that property – prosperity and poverty - should be associated with a (shared) conception of merit
- Gambling breaks the connexion between possessions and desert
- No society which does this and which lacks a rule linking property to desert can reasonably hope to avoid poverty and secure prosperity.
- This is why we disapprove of gambling as such regardless of its consequences

A Possible Policy Implication

- Some people have strong moral views about gambling: Some don't
- Instead on basing policy on allegedly factual matters about which we know very little, we should be upfront and take these moral views into account and simply let local communities decide on what forms of gambling they want, how much, with what regulations etc
- In other words make the regulation of gambling a matter of open moral conviction rather than a pseudo-matter of undeterminable fact

Evidence-based policy-making?

It might be nice to base policy, not on contested values but instead, on agreed, well-evidenced, morality-neutral facts about costs and benefits

Unfortunately, I don't know any such facts.

But neither do you.

Here's What we don't know in the sense of having reached a strong, morality-free consensus (1)

Anything to do with problem gambling:

- What it means
- What causes it
- How to cure it
- Does it matter

Here's What we don't know in the sense of having reached a strong, morality-free consensus (2)

- What the effect of liberalising gambling law and, allowing for displacement, on job-creation/destruction? On tax revenues and expenditures? On the moral character of future citizens
- How much of gambling earnings come from problem gamblers

A Further thought: Why limit this to gambling?

- Almost all our disagreements have strong components of moral identity.
- We actually *feel* good about ourselves because we are for or against more or less liberalisation of gambling law and this feeling shapes or at least correlates with our publicly held views.
- But this is also true of other more important cases – many derived from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

Further Examples

- So we *feel good* about being dutiful and pious church members or alternatively about being tough-minded, grown-up scientists who have no need of the false consolations of religion
- We are *proud* of our left-wing or right-wing political loyalties
- We *applaud* ourselves for being sexually liberated or sexually responsible – etc, etc

How value-based approaches would differ from evidence-based approaches, e.g. in respect to research integrity

- Perhaps it suggests that, instead of trying to resolve our public debates with “evidence” and “argument” we should look to people’s wider moral visions of what they think a good life and a good society would look like
- Perhaps it also suggests that when we do genuinely look for evidence and argument (without scare quotes) about issues of public policy including gambling, we should be a great deal more charitable towards each other than we usually are

Implication of the “Big Picture” Approach: Honest advocacy research

- Perhaps we should accept that “evidence” and “argument” in policy debates are never pure and rarely simple
- We should preserve our integrity, therefore, by admitting this instead of denying it and concede that we are all engaged much of the time in advocacy research. (Anyone who has consulted for government has certainly engaged in advocacy research)
- All that integrity would then demand for advocacy research, is that that we don’t pretend we are engaged in the disinterested pursuit of truth when what we are really trying to do is to build the strongest case for a particular course of action

Implication of the “Charity” Requirement

From Daniel Dennett quoting Anatol Rapaport:

- Attempt to express your target’s position so clearly, vividly and fairly that your target says: “Thanks, I wish I’d thought of putting it like that.”
- List any points of agreement
- Mention anything you have learned from your target
- Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism

Conclusion

- Part of what I've been saying is to rehearse Mill's maxim: "He who knows only his own side of a case knows little of that"
- More generally it has been a plea for the kind of deep integrity which makes truly constructive and collaborative intellectual inquiry both possible and potentially fruitful – and which gives conferences such as this one their purpose
- Finally, I believe that the phrase "deep integrity" captures what was perhaps the most abiding and profound intellectual virtue of this conference's founder and the quality he would himself have most vigorously urged us to develop amongst ourselves. I honour him, therefore, for his both his practice and his preaching of "deep integrity"

Thank you

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