

Are We All Bigots Now?

First, some terms need to be defined here if this is going to make any sense.

big·ot /'big?t/: *a person intolerant of those holding different opinions.*

o·pin·ion /?'piny?n/: *a view or judgment formed about something, not necessarily based on fact or knowledge.*

For the sake of clarity, let us say that opinions are the sort of ideas that cannot be proved right or wrong. For example, in my opinion Japanese food is the best, the 1996 Bulls would crush the 2016 Golden State Warriors, and puppies are way cuter than kittens. Opinions are those things on which we must agree to disagree. For the most part, they are above criticism.

Are there really any “bigots” according to those definitions? Maybe, but that usually isn’t what people mean when they accuse others with that word.

Now, it’s important to note there are a couple ways to be intolerant. The first involves being intolerant of those [people] holding different opinions than oneself; the second is being intolerant of an opinion.

The former seems as childish as not inviting a kid to your birthday party because she likes reading books instead of doing ballet. (I don’t know any adults who do this, but if they exist, we’d likely call them immature, not a bigot.) And the latter just seems unnecessary. Why should one be intolerant to the idea that Japanese cuisine is the best?

Then where are all these bigots coming from? I think it originates from a much deeper issue; one that relegates beliefs to the level of opinion.

Belief: an acceptance that a statement is true or that something exists.

Beliefs are different from opinions, but the distinction is often not drawn, so people think they are pretty much the same thing and treat them the same.

Opinion creates a statement that cannot be right or wrong; but belief receives a statement that is right or wrong, accepts it, and assents to it. The belief itself is right or wrong depending on whether or not the statement is true or the thing exists. This goes back to truth: a statement that corresponds to reality is true, while one that does not correspond to reality is false. If you believe the moon is made of cheese, your belief is wrong.

What happens most often when people accuse others of being bigots, they mean (perhaps unintentionally, since beliefs and opinions are often conflated) this definition: a person intolerant of different beliefs, particularly moral beliefs.

And of course, in the eyes of the accused, those “different” beliefs are wrong beliefs and they are rightfully opposing them.

But the primary reason one would want to call someone a bigot is to discredit them, because they believe they are wrong for saying something is wrong. This is hypocrisy. One person states the belief that {a certain other belief validating an action} is wrong, and the other replies with the belief that {believing something is wrong} is wrong because it is restrictive.

Yet, a simple charge of hypocrisy here seems to be only a philosophical quip that does not solve the issue. The concern persists, because beliefs are seen as equivalent to opinions; an opinion is seen as something that cannot be right or wrong—any option is legitimate—and this characteristic is applied to moral beliefs as well.

“People have different beliefs,” they say, as if this tosses the issue up into a suspension that cannot be criticized. But if this is truly what they mean—that moral beliefs cannot be right or wrong—this flies in the face of common sense.

If it is true, and in the end morality is just whatever we want it to be, then any horror can be justified. Genocide isn't so bad, if the person thinks they're just doing some much desired “ethnic cleansing.” Now when an example like this is brought up, those who at first protest against “objective morality”—the idea that moral beliefs can be in reality right or wrong—are quick to defer to some objective moral standard, usually something about no apparent harm being done. It is supposed to be objectively okay to do anything whatsoever as long as the parties involved want it. Anything that poses as an obstacle to this is denounced as restrictive and sought to be removed. It elevates restriction to “objectively bad” and ironically prescribes restriction as the proper response to it.

But some operate by holding that the objective moral standard is a bit higher than that. A thing could be wrong even if you wanted it, even if everyone on the whole planet wanted it. And something that appears harmless may be in fact horrible, in cutting you short of a much greater good. It is idealistic and based on teleology and the natures of things, which the other view conveniently claims do not exist.

Practically speaking, these two views (and others, if they exist, but these are the ones I've come across most) are mutually exclusive. In theory, however, the first view should tolerate the second, because those who hold the second view desire to hold it. And that is the sole basis for something being acceptable in the first view. But the fact that the second view ends up being restrictive of others who hold the first view who do not wish to be restricted overrides the desire of those of the second view. It ends up saying one desire is better and more important than another. And that is

bigotry.

So this is it... if anyone at all believes that morality is objective, (which most people actually do, lest they become moral monsters) they are either a bigot with high standards or a bigot with low and vaguely hypocritical standards. The bigot of this second type might feel very satisfied in saying, "Of course I'm against intolerance; I'm for tolerance!" while perhaps ignoring or even proudly accepting the fact that being against something is itself intolerance. They might have a point, on the surface, if you don't think about it too much. They are for people getting to do what they want and against them not getting to do what they want.

But they are still appealing to this shaky objective standard of no harm done absent consent, and being intolerant of a different objective standard. It cannot be that objective standards in themselves are wrong to hold, for that is self-refuting. In reality there only is one objective moral standard, though people might not realize which it is and end up exalting their own, falsely treating it as the real one. And even if one just simply "doesn't care," that too is an assent to a lazy ideology stating that these things do not matter, to the exclusion of any ideology that says they do.

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[Image Credit: Bud Yorkin Productions/All in the Family]