

Ethical Relativism and Our Obligations to Those Outside Canada

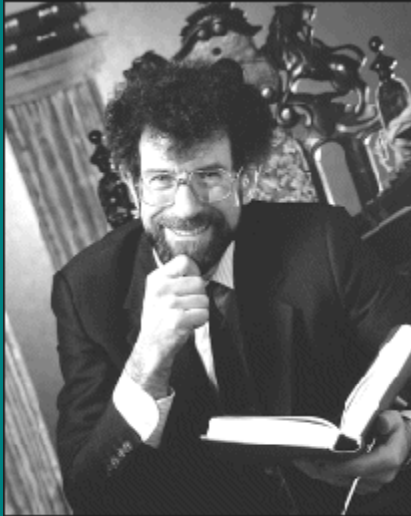
York Emerging Global Leaders Program
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Who Was Sheldon Chumir?



“As it is my conviction that ethical values are the foundation of a healthy society, I desire that potential leaders be identified and encouraged to study and contemplate their ethical responsibilities.”

“I have witnessed how leadership exercised by individuals motivated by high ethical purpose can bring about significant change for the betterment of our society. My desire is that the Foundation advance and encourage this type of leadership in our community.”

Sheldon Chumir
1940-1992

About the Foundation

- The Foundation works on a variety of issues. Two primary priorities:

- 1) Reform of Alberta's human rights (anti-discrimination) law

- 2) Issues connected with diversity, such as free speech in a multicultural society, the appropriate role of religion in Canadian public life and the impact of greater diversity on gender equality in Canada.

- Annual internship program – we are always seeking qualified, motivated graduates with an interest in ethics in leadership.

Introduction

- We want to do two things today:
- (ii) Analyse the nature of ethical relativism to see how it is connected to questions about our obligations to those abroad
- (iii) Consider arguments concerning the nature and extent of our obligations to those abroad

Analysis of Relativism

- (P1) Moral rightness and wrongness of actions vary from society to society, so there are no universal moral standards held by all societies.
- (P2) Whether or not it is right for individuals to act in a certain way depends on (or is relative to) the society to which they belong.
- (C) Therefore, there are no absolute or objective moral standards that apply to all people everywhere and at all times. (Pojman, 168)

The Diversity Thesis

- (P1) the *diversity thesis*: an empirical claim about what is the case: “moral rules differ from society to society”

The Dependency Thesis

- (P2) the dependency thesis: the idea that the wrongness or rightness of individual acts depends on or is relative to “the nature of the society from which they emanate.”

Dependency Thesis implies...

- The dependency thesis says that “Only the standards of Somalians should be used to judge the actions of a Somalian.”
- And notice that the corollary here is that “The standards of Somalians *should not* be used to judge the actions of a Canadian.”

The Problem of Evaluation

- Relativism is a response to the problem of intercultural moral evaluation
- How are we to judge the ethical standards and actions of other people who do not share our cultural background?
- Whose standards should apply?
- Are there better/worse moral standards?

Argument Summary

- (P1) There are different standards relative to different cultures/societies.
- (P2) Evaluations depend upon a given cultures' standards.
- (C) There are no standards that apply across cultures, i.e., to everyone.

Descriptive vs. Prescriptive

- Descriptive Relativism: picks out the fact of the diversity of ethical practices/values
- Prescriptive Relativism: further claim that *we ought not* to apply the ethical standards of one group to the behaviour of another group

Prescriptive Relativism

- Prescriptive relativism is itself a moral judgement:
- “You cannot ethically judge other cultures”
- Why would someone hold this view?

Why is Relativism Attractive?

Why is Relativism Attractive?

- Perceived irresolvable moral disagreement
- Globalization
- Respect for other cultures/beliefs
- Tolerance of other's values
- Scepticism about own values
- Fear of imperialism, absolutism or ethnocentrism

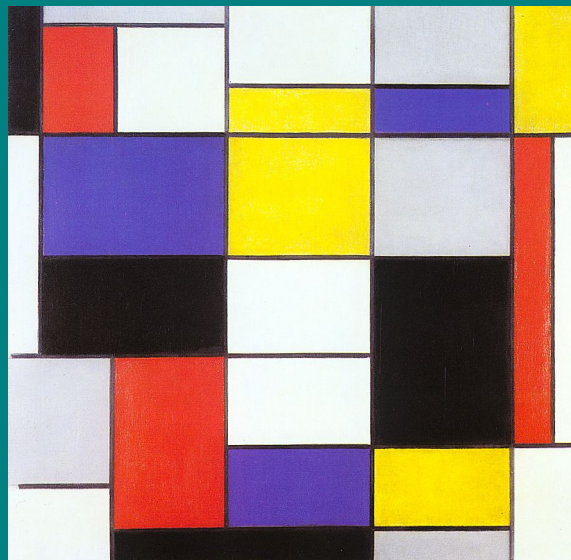
What Are Some Reasons For
Rejecting Cultural Relativism?

Why We Aren't Really Relativists (even if we think we are)

- Cultures aren't uniform

What Do We Mean by “Culture”

- We tend to think of cultures or societies as being like a Mondrian painting:



Cultures Are Not Uniform

- But, in fact, aren't cultures/societies more like a Jackson Pollock?



Why We Aren't Really Relativists (even if we think we are) [continued]

- Self-refuting
- Asymmetry of judgements
- Respect may actually demand criticism
- Ethical paralysis

FGM and Our Obligations to Others

- (Assuming we are opposed to FGM on moral grounds, i.e., we think it is wrong)
- *Do Canadians have a moral obligation to work to end the practice of FGM?*
- *Do we have moral obligations to the women affected by this practice?*

The Nature and Extent of Our Obligations to Others

- We can make moral judgements about practices from other cultures.
- But how far are we obliged to go in addressing the ethical problem in question?

Shallow Pond Principle

“If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would ... be a very bad thing.”

- Peter Singer

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (2006).

Essence of Shallow Pond

- If something very bad is happening and I can solve the problem at little bother or cost to myself, then I ought to do that.

Applied to FGM

- Girl in your child's day-care or school, or
- Child within your extended family
- You can intervene to try to ensure that child's safety, at little (?) cost to yourself
- Therefore, you should.

What some people have taken the Shallow Pond Principle to mean

“If you can prevent something bad from happening at the cost of something less bad, you ought to do it.”

Might sound good, but what does it really mean?

- Might require that we destitute ourselves
- “Something less bad” = ?
 - Is it less bad that I do not fix my front steps and am sued for a lot of money after the mail carrier gets hurt?
 - Is it less bad that I do not go to see my ailing mother in Winnipeg?
- Isn't almost anything I can think of “less bad” than that an innocent child undergoes mutilation?

Try this: “You should do the most you can to minimize the amount of badness in the world”

- Could this really be our operating principle?
- Could we live according to it?
 1. “the most” – How can we measure this?
 2. “can” – What sense of “can”?
 3. “badness” – Can we measure badness? Is there only one kind of “badness”?

Applied to FGM

1. What is the *most* I can do?
2. In what sense *can* I do anything about FGM in Somalia?
3. If attempts at intervention cause further restrictions and misery for women in those states, have we really done any good?

How about the “Basic Needs” approach?

- People have a right to the satisfaction of their basic needs, such as, health, food, shelter, education.
- But even if true, what are your or our moral obligations to help others satisfy those needs?

Back where we started

- What are our obligations to others?
How far do we have to go in meeting our obligations to others?
- Are there no limitations?

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An example: FGM

- Female Genital Mutilation, often described as female circumcision, refers to partial or total removal of the external female genitalia
- Usually performed by traditional practitioner
- Crude instruments and without anesthetic – many associated health risks.
- Some call for medicalization, but most human rights groups call for a complete ban.
- It is illegal in Canada

FGM Health Risks

- Immediate complications:
- Severe pain, shock, hemorrhage and infection.
- Hemorrhage and infection can cause death.

- Long-term consequences:
- Abscesses, painful sexual intercourse, difficulties with childbirth.
- Increased risk of maternal and child morbidity and mortality due to obstructed labour.
- Psychological effects can range from anxiety to severe depression.

Where is FGM practised?

- FGM is practiced in at least 28 of 53 African countries and is considered an ancient cultural practice.
- The prevalence ranges from 98% in Somalia, to 5% in Zaire.
- FGM is also found in Oman, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, parts of India, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Sources: FGM

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