

## Ethical Relativism and Our Obligations to Those Outside Canada

York Emerging Global Leaders Program

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- Good afternoon, it's a pleasure to be here for the York Emerging Global Leaders Program. It seems like too nice a setting to stay inside and bore you with a philosophy talk on a Saturday (strongly agree? Disagree?), but I hope that we will learn from each other during our session.

- Before we start talking about ethical relativism and our obligations to others, I'd like to say a few words about the Calgary-based Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership. (Yes, we have ethics in Calgary!)

- My name is Dan Shapiro and I'm a Research Associate at the Foundation. I consider myself very fortunate to be able to think and write about ethics as an occupation.

- Perhaps more importantly, I'm very pleased that I finally have a response to all of the people who said about my philosophy studies, "What are you going to do with that?"

(Slide 2) - Sheldon Chumir would never have asked such a question about the kind of ethical reflection that we have been engaged in so far today. He believed that ethical values are fundamental to a healthy democracy. Sheldon was a true Renaissance man: he was a Calgarian, a Rhodes scholar, a tax lawyer, a civil liberties lawyer (who took on most cases without pay), and a businessman in the oil and gas industry.

- But don't think that his life was all work and no play: he was also an avid hockey player (a journalist once described him as "a bit of a left-winger – on and off the

ice!”), and, of all things, a rock concert promoter! You’ve probably heard of some of the bands he brought to Calgary, like The Who, Supertramp, and Queen.

- However, Sheldon is best remembered for his service as an MLA in the Calgary-Buffalo riding during the last six years of his life. Within that six-year period he became known as the ‘conscience of the legislature’ and was well-respected by members on all sides of the house.

- When Sheldon became ill rather suddenly, he decided to leave his estate in trust to create a Foundation to foster ethics in leadership. The Foundation’s role comprises three related missions: Leadership, Discussion and Education. The York Emerging Global Leaders Program has the distinction of serving all three of these missions, and we are proud to support it.

(Slide 3) – The Foundation’s current focus is on reform of Alberta’s human rights legislation – we are releasing a report recommending a number of changes next week

- and work on diversity, which was the subject of our most recent large symposium in October.

- We also run an annual internship program and are always looking for qualified, motivated students interested in ethical leadership. Visit our website to learn more – this year’s application deadline is March 15, so if you are anything like me, you have until March 14<sup>th</sup> to compose and courier in your application!

(Slide 4) – Now, I’d like to do two things today: analyse the nature of relativism and consider its implications for our obligations to those abroad. In case we run out of time, let me tell you the crux of my argument up front: If you are a cultural

relativist, you can't make sense of the notion of having ethical obligations to those outside your own culture or society. Why?

- Because if you don't think that there are ethical standards that apply cross-culturally, then you have no ethical standards with which to evaluate another culture's practices, nor can they evaluate and criticize your culture. Let's try to make some more sense of this.

(Slide 5) An Analysis of Relativism

Philosopher Louis Pojman offers the following definition 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)

- (Agree? Disagree?)

- Now, notice that there is an important difference between (P1) and (P2). The first premise (P1) is descriptive: it picks out a fact about the world, namely that different societies have different moral practices and different conceptions of right and wrong. For example, in some societies, Female Genital Mutilation is considered morally wrong, while in others it is morally permissible. In other words, premise (P1) makes note of the *diversity* of moral standards belonging to different societies.

- But right away we should note that just because there happens to be such diversity, it doesn't follow that all sets of moral standards/practices are equally *right* or *justified*.

(Slide 6)

- Let's call (P1) the *diversity thesis*: an empirical claim about what is the case: "moral rules differ from society to society"

- ok, true; seems fair enough so far

(Slide 7)

- but the relativist goes further:

- what the relativist position does is combine (P1) *the diversity thesis* with
- (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."

- In other words, (2) maintains that the *justification* or *rightness* of actions depends on the society in question.

(Slide 8)

- 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."

(Slide 9)

- And this is the problem/question which relativism sets out to address, 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?

- i.e., relativism is a response to the fact of moral diversity and the possibility that there can be no standard of adjudication between sets of moral values

- The problem is: “Well, Somalians think that FGM is ok, but Canadians think it is not; how can we decide whether it is morally permissible or not?”

- And the relativist response is:

- “Well, we can’t agree about it, so let’s just agree to disagree: Somalians have their standards and we’ll have ours.”

- There are a number of reasons why this view seems so attractive, which we’ll return to in a moment.

First, let’s recap our definition:

(Slide 10) - Argument Summary

- (1) there are different standards relative to different cultures/societies
- (2) evaluations depend upon a given cultures’ standards
- (3) there are no standards that apply across cultures, i.e., to everyone

So, this is the definition of cultural relativism that we are working with today.

(Slide 11) - That ethical standards differ between societies/cultures and that the standards of one group cannot be used to evaluate the practices of another group.

(Slide 12)

- We are concerned with this view as a moral claim (prescriptive relativism):
- “you cannot morally judge other cultures”
- It is a claim about what is right/appropriate to do vis-à-vis other cultures.

(Slide 13) - **Why might someone hold this view?**

(solicit responses)

(Slide 14) - The impetus for relativism:

- Relativism as response to perceived irresolvable moral disagreements
  - Globalization: increasing awareness of other moral points of view and increasing friction between them
  - Out of respect for others’ cultural/religious beliefs and practices
  - Tolerance of other people’s values
  - Scepticism or uncertainty about the justification of our own moral values
  - Unease about imperialism, absolutism or ethnocentrism which does not recognize the importance of other people’s values (“Our truth is *the* truth”)
- So those are some of the reasons why we might be in favour of cultural ethical relativism.

(Slide 15) - **What are some of the reasons why we should not be ethical relativists?**

Reasons to be sceptical about the truth of relativism:

(Slide 16) - Cultures aren't uniform so perhaps the idea of irresolvable moral disagreements doesn't make sense

(Slide 17)

- We tend to think of cultures or societies as being like a Mondrian painting—a series of discrete blocks or silos which do not interact with each other and cannot understand each other

(Slide 18) - But, in fact, aren't cultures/societies more like a Jackson Pollock?

- Isn't there significant disagreement *within* cultures about morality, e.g., the abortion or gay marriage debates within Canadian or American society?

- Moreover, isn't there significant overlap *amongst different cultures*, e.g., try to imagine a culture without a conception of respect. Can you?

- Of course, different cultures may enact their concept of respect differently – in some cultures it is a sign of respect to look people in the eye, in others it is not,

- and cultures may even have different *objects* of respect, consider the different status of women or elders in different cultures.

- But does it follow from these kinds of differences that there is no common ground between cultures from which to understand and criticize each other?

- Remember that relativism arises because of the diversity thesis: we notice the differences between cultural conceptions of morality and we conclude that there is no common morality shared across cultural boundaries

- But this seems to be a false assumption, or at least it is overstated

(Slide 19)

- In any case, relativism is self-refuting: the relativist denies that there is any absolute standard for comparing ethical standards but then claims that we *ought* not to judge others' ethical standards
- This is itself an ethical judgment (“ought”) and so the relativist is caught in a contradiction: **they deny the objectivity and universality of all ethical judgments *except* for the one that we ought not to judge others**
  
- But why should anyone else accept this?
- Can't we just say to the relativist: “well that's just your opinion about ethical judgments, but since it is on the same level as every other ethical judgement, we don't have to accept it”?
- Put another way: there is a problem about tolerance:
- The relativist argues that there are *no* universal moral standards and so we should be tolerant of others
- But why should a society which has no conception of tolerance accept this?
- i.e., the relativist says that there are no universal standards except for tolerance, but what grounds does the relativist have for the universality of tolerance?
  
- Moreover, notice that ethical relativism would prevent us from praising just as much as from criticizing other cultures and it would insulate us from the moral judgments of others
- Asymmetry of judgments: if we can't criticize – or praise – other cultures, why do we think that they can criticize or praise us?
- For example, the West uses most of world's resources, but if we are relativists, we can't justify criticism of this fact coming from the developing world—

overconsumption is just “our way” of doing things; no one can say that it is unfair if there is no cross-cultural conception of fairness.

- Respect and tolerance of other people’s values and practices *do not* entail that we may not criticize them

- In fact, respect may actually demand criticism, properly understood

- Isn’t there something condescending about saying, “I don’t understand your belief in the rightness of holding slaves (because I don’t share it), but I respect it”

- This would mean that the person could stand for the exact opposite belief and I would still respect him.

- Isn’t this actually *disrespectful*?

- I’m telling him that I don’t care what he stands for because his views don’t matter to me.

- I think that coming to understand someone else’s beliefs, and therefore respecting them, involves being justified in our favourable judgments of their beliefs

- If we can be justified in making favourable judgments, logically we can also be justified in making critical judgments

- But this requires humility and healthy skepticism about the justification of our own moral values—there is no room for smug superiority here:

- Remember the whole issue of relativism arose in response to intercultural evaluations and the need to avoid ethnocentrism

- If we are willing to criticize others, we must be open to criticism in return

- The claim “you cannot morally judge other cultures” is in fact itself a moral judgment. It is a claim about what it is right/appropriate to do vis-à-vis other cultures. But I think it is a mistaken view. This doesn’t mean that we can easily

arrive at answers about how to deal with intercultural moral judgements, but at least it means that we can start with dialogue.

**- Whereas, if we accept relativism, then we seem paralyzed with regards to our obligations to others:**

- We say that all ethical standards are equal so there are no grounds for us to criticize practices which we find abhorrent and we have no grounds for any obligations to assist those who are harmed by such practices — after all that’s just “their” way of doing things and “we” have “ours”

- But, I don’t think that most people are actually willing to say this when they’ve had time to really think about it

**- If we reject relativism**, i.e., we think we can make moral judgments about the practices of other cultures—and vice versa—then it seems that we do have some obligations towards others. So, we seem to have established that we have some ethical grounds to criticize, for example, FGM, and thus an obligation to oppose it.

(Slide 20) – What do you think?

(Slide 21) - Let’s assume for the sake of argument that we can make moral judgements about practices from other cultures. This still leaves open a number of questions about the nature and extent of our obligations to others.

- How far are we obliged to go in addressing an ethical problem, say the prevalence of FGM in Somalia (reportedly 98%)?

(Slide 22) - Consider a simple example about moral obligations first:  
Shallow Pond Principle (Singer, quoted in Appiah)

“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”.

(Slide 23) - Seems like a typical example from a philosopher – maybe silly (painfully obvious) but perhaps also useful to get us started.

- Now consider it applied to FGM

1. Imagine that you learn of a child in your child’s day-care or school who is going to have this done to her. All you need to do is tell the school principal about the threat to this child. Are you obliged to do this? Should you do this?
2. Suppose it is even closer to home: within your own extended family?
3. (Omit) If you find it hard to imagine this kind of threat to a child, imagine some other form of abuse.

- You can intervene to try to ensure that child’s safety at little cost to yourself; therefore, you should.

- This seems uncontroversial

- But thinking about **global citizenship** – as “emerging global leaders” –

- the question becomes – **obligations to which others? And what is the extent of our obligation to them? How far are we obliged to go?**

- I think these are very hard questions. I think that I have obligations to people in other countries and other parts of the world, but I don’t know what it is that I owe them.

(Slide 25)

- a. Some philosophers have said that “If you can prevent something bad from happening at the cost of something less bad, you ought to do it.” (Appiah, p. 160.)
- b. Sound good? Really amounts to “you should do the most you can to minimize the amount of badness in the world”

(Slide 26)

- c. Do we believe this? Well, what does “less bad” mean here?

- is it less bad that I do not fix my front steps and am sued 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 everything we can think of less bad than that an innocent child undergoes mutilation?

d. So, the Shallow Pond Principle could be called the "impoverishment principle"

(Slide 27) - If I have to do the most I can to minimize the amount of badness in the world, then it seems that I should give to charity and until I am nearly impoverished myself, interrupt my comfortable life in a modern home to go abroad to help others, neglect my relatively comfortable family in order to help those less fortunate, and so on.

- Could this really be our operating principle as emerging global leaders?

e. If we don't believe this, why don't we believe it?

i. Considerations:

1. "the most" – how can we measure this?
2. "can" – what sense of "can"
3. "badness" – is there a measure of badness? Is there only one kind of "badness"?

(Slide 28) – Consider this 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?

f. Appiah: rather likes what he calls "the emergency principle"

- i. "If you are the person in the best position to prevent something really awful, and it won't cost you much to do so, do it."
- ii. He likes it; it strikes me as the very least that could ever be expected of me.

(Slide 29)

iii. How about thinking about our ethical obligations to those outside Canada in terms of “Basic needs”?

- Assuming that people do have a right to the satisfaction of their basic needs, what are your or our obligations to help others satisfy those needs?

(Slide 30)

- Back where we started

- I've suggested 2 things today:

1) That ethical relativism – the belief that there are no cross-cultural standards of morality – can lead to a kind of ethical paralysis that obscures our obligations to others

2) That even if we take ourselves to have ethical obligations to others outside our culture/society, figuring out the nature and extent of those obligations is actually quite difficult.

- Now, as emerging global leaders, I'd like to hear your views about our obligations to others outside our own culture or society.

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