

What is ethical relativism?

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- Let's try to get to grips with what we mean by "relativism."

(a) What is Relativism? (slide 2)

"Ethical relativism is the doctrine that the moral rightness and wrongness of actions vary from society to society and that there are not absolute universal moral standards on all [humans] at all times. ... it holds that whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he [or she] belongs."

John Ladd, *Ethical Relativism* (Wadsworth, 1973)

An Analysis of Relativism (slide 3)

Philosopher Louis Pojman extracts the following argument from Ladd's statement:

(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)

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, FGM 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 4)

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

- but the relativist goes further: (slide 5)
- 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. Notice that this is not simply a descriptive claim, not just a statement of fact. It is what philosophers call a *normative* claim: it says something about what is right, about standards of justification.

(slide 6)

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 Canadians.”

(slide 7)

- 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 (apparent) fact of moral diversity and the possibility of incommensurability between sets of moral values
- The problem is: “well, Somalians think that FGM is ok, but we Canadians think it is not; how can we decide whether it is morally permissible or not?”
- “well, we can’t agree about it, so let’s just agree to disagree by letting them have their standards and we’ll have ours.”
- There are a number of reasons why this view seems so attractive, which we will return to in a moment.

First, let’s finish unpacking our definition:

(slide 8) 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.

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

- 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.

Why might someone hold this view?

(b) Reasons for Being a Relativist (solicit responses) (slide 10)

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 or absolutism which does not recognize the importance of other people's values ("Our truth is *the* truth")
- Avoid ethnocentrism (response to the problem of intercultural ethical evaluation)

So those are some of the reasons why we might be in favour of cultural ethical relativism.

What are some of the reasons why we should not be ethical relativists? (slide 11)

(c) Reasons to be sceptical about the truth of relativism:

- Cultures aren't uniform so perhaps the idea of irresolvable moral disagreements doesn't make sense (slide 12)
- 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 13)
- But, in fact, aren't cultures/societies more like a Jackson Pollock? (slide 14)
- 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 honesty. Can you?
- Of course, different cultures may enact their concept of honesty differently, but does it follow 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 15)

- 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/praise us (e.g., 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 (because I don’t share it), but I respect it”
- I think that coming to understand someone else’s beliefs, and therefore respecting them, involves being justified in our favourable judgments of their beliefs
- And because of the point about the asymmetry of judgments, 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
- False dichotomy between absolutism or relativism: irresolvable moral disagreements are in fact far less common than our *agreement* in judgments; in any case, our choice need not be between absolutism and relativism: we can engage in debate about moral values/practices in an attempt to rationally resolve our disagreements (just because we do not achieve our ideal in practice, does not mean the ideal is mistaken)

- 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.
- **Finally, 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.**

Sources

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