

Moral Relativism

1. Introduction

Here are four questions (of course there are others) we might want an ethical theory to answer for us:

- i) Which acts are right and which are wrong? Which acts *ought* we to perform (understanding the "ought" as a moral "ought")?
- ii) What *makes* a particular action right or wrong? What is it about the action that determines its moral status?
- iii) How do we *know* what is right and wrong?
- iv) What, if anything, motivates us to do what is right?

Normative ethics: addresses "first-order" questions about our moral lives, questions about what morality requires/permits us to do, and what is morally valuable. E.g. should we be vegetarians? Is euthanasia permissible? Is it (morally) good to devote oneself to a life of pleasure.

Meta-ethics: addresses questions about first-order (normative) ethical judgments, e.g., about the nature of morality; the meaning of moral talk; whether morality is absolute or relative; whether moral judgments can be true or false (objective) or merely subjective, how we can have knowledge of moral truth.

2. The Problem of Moral Relativism

A. Cultural Relativism

There are many different forms of moral relativism. The problem begins with the fact of moral *diversity*: different cultures have different moral codes. Of course, it's not just between different national cultures that moral opinions differ; the same can happen between different subcultures of the same national culture. What does this show? Consider:

Moral diversity: Different cultures have different moral codes/values.

Consider a different, though related claim:

Moral conflict: Different cultures have conflicting moral codes/values.

Does moral *diversity* imply moral *disagreement*? Not obviously. Consider:

- i) different definitions of actions at issue, e.g., of euthanasia, rape, terrorism, self-defense.
- ii) different factual assumptions, e.g. regarding the mental life of animals.

Nevertheless, there does seem to be at least *some* genuine moral disagreement around. The most famous such issue is probably abortion. Some people disagree about abortion because they disagree on whether abortion is killing a person, since they have different views about what counts as a person. Yet sometimes people agree that it is in some sense a person, but disagree about whether it is permissible in such cases to take a life. Cultures disagree about right and wrong in a way that cannot be explained by assigning different meanings to their words or in terms of background factual disagreements. What does this tell us about morality?

Moral Objectivists hold that there are genuine moral truths, and that some cultures have got ahold of this truth, while others are somehow missing it. This would be to treat moral laws as

akin to physical laws. All that moral diversity shows is how very difficult it can be to get ahold of the right moral laws. So this is one interpretation of moral disagreement: moral *objectivism* tempered by a certain amount of moral *skepticism*, that is, doubts about our ability to know the objective moral truth. Yet this suggests is that we can't really rely on our consciences in deciding what to do. For our consciences were formed in this culture and it's not clear that this culture has the correct moral views.

Cultural Relativists note that different cultures have opposing *legal* codes; what's legally right or wrong depends on one's society. Their idea is that we should understand what's morally right or wrong in a way analogous to legal right or wrong. In Britain it's legal to drive on the left-hand side of the street; in America it's not legal. This raises no deep philosophical quandaries. No one asks: Which is the *truly* legal way to drive? For we all realize that what is legal is relative to a given setting. Same with etiquette. Why think that moral disagreements are any different? E.g., here is Wm. Graham Sumner (1906):

The "right" way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down. The tradition is its own warrant. It is not held subject to verification by experience. The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, *whatever is, is right...*

The moral truths pertaining to a people is a function of the way *those* people have chosen to organize their lives. There is no universal moral truth; talk of moral judgments being "true" or "false" needs qualification since there are no objective standards for morality outside particular cultures. For example, a moral judgment may be "true for us" or "true for culture C" but never simply "true". See, e.g., the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on *Moral Relativism*, section 2: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/#2>

Metaethical Moral Relativism (MMR). The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons. In other words, in order to determine whether a moral claim of the form "Action A is wrong" is true or false, one must understand it to be elliptical for a claim of the form "According to moral framework M, action A is wrong," and there are legitimate and conflicting moral frameworks.

MMR is not the view that we should be sensitive to, and tolerant of, the practices of other cultures. Tolerance is a (first-order) normative demand, and not a meta-ethical claim.

MMR is not simply the view that there are no "universal (absolute) truths" in ethics, true for all peoples for all times. It may be that the objective moral truths vary over time (e.g., perhaps what is possible for humans varies over time, and what is morally required or permitted depends on what is possible for us); or perhaps there are objective moral truths that depend in important ways on one's context, e.g., it is objectively true that one ought to abide by the just laws of one's society. To grant this is not to be a moral or cultural relativist.

B. Relativism and individual moral codes

Note that relativism also has individualistic forms (these are sometimes called "subjectivism"). Suppose Albert utters the sentence 'Hank ought to be a vegetarian' and Betty utters the sentence 'It's false that Hank ought to be a vegetarian'. According to *agent* relativism, what Albert said is true just in case in relation to Hank's moral framework, he ought to be a vegetarian, and what Betty said is true just in case, in relation to Hank's moral framework, he ought not to be a vegetarian. So what Albert said is the denial of what Betty said: if Albert spoke truly then Betty spoke falsely, and vice versa. Thus, although agent relativism really is a form of *relativism*

(because what morality requires of a person is dependent on that person's moral framework), it is *not* a form of relativism that allows two apparently conflicting moral judgments to both be true.

According to *critic* relativism, on the other hand, what Albert said is true just in case in relation to *Albert's* moral framework, Hank ought to be a vegetarian, and what Betty said is true just in case in relation to *Betty's* moral framework, Hank ought not to be a vegetarian. So what Albert said is quite consistent with what Betty said: Albert and Betty might *both* have spoken truly. Critic relativism, then, *does* allow two apparently conflicting moral judgments to both be true.

But how can Albert and Betty both speak truly? After all, Betty utters a sentence that is the *negation* of the sentence that Albert utters, and surely a sentence and its negation can't both be true! Here we have to distinguish between a *sentence* that a person utters and *what she says* (or *the proposition she asserts*) by uttering that sentence.

Sometimes what one says depends not only on the sentence one utters, but also on the context of utterance. And sometimes a person A who utters 'p' in context C₁ and a person B who utters 'Not p' in context C₂ can assert propositions that are both true.

Example: suppose Albert is hungry and Betty is not hungry, and let 'p' be 'I am hungry'. Another example: suppose Albert is on a moving train with Alfonse, and suppose Betty is on the platform, and let 'p' be 'Alfonse is stationary'. (So the claim that a sentence and its negation can't both be true should be revised to read: a sentence and its negation can't both be true *with respect to the same context*.)

3. Some Consequences of Moral Relativism?

So, does it follow from the fact of deep-seated moral disagreements that moral relativism is true? Pretty clearly it doesn't *follow*. But even if there is no knock-down argument from moral conflict to moral relativism, the question is, what is the *best* way to understand widespread moral disagreement? Let's begin with some worrisome consequences of relativism.

Cross-Cultural Criticism. Often we want to call some foreign custom or practice morally objectionable. But can we, if we are relativists?

Intra-Cultural Criticism. According to the relativist, there's a simple test for deciding what's right and wrong. Just consult the standards of your society; for all "right" and "wrong" mean in your mouth are right and wrong-according-to-those-standards. But normally we admit that our moral code is not perfect. On what basis can the relativist say this?

Intra-cultural Conflict. In every culture, there are disagreements about what counts as right or wrong. It is misleading to suggest that there is such a thing as "the standards of your society", since societies are complex and evolving. At best a relativist would have to pick some subset of values that members of the society endorse (which members? The dominant ones?), but why those as opposed to the others?

Moral Progress. How can there be moral progress if right means right-according-to-our-existing moral code? Moral progress happens when someone says, our existing moral code falls short of the moral truth; hence it needs to be adjusted. Again, is this compatible with relativism?

4. Deeper Problems?

Now, interesting as these objections are, a convinced relativist could try to bite the bullet. That is, maybe we *shouldn't* engage in moral criticism; and maybe our highly touted moral progress is

just so much self-congratulation. But are there deeper problems with relativism? Some suggest that relativism is somehow incoherent, that it undermines itself:

Toleration an Absolute/Objective Value? Suppose, as some relativists suggest, that it's arrogant and absurd to criticize another culture's values. This appears to lead the relativist into a contradiction, for it seems that they are offering the rule of *toleration* as non-relative moral rule. One cannot both say that there are no objective moral values and that toleration is one. (Note, however, that a relativist can simply deny that toleration is morally required. But then does relativism lose some of its appeal?)

Disappearance of Disagreement. Often relativists claim that we are not to criticize other culture's values; we should "agree to disagree" and leave them to their own perspectives. Problem is, if relativism is true then we *don't disagree*. Consider a series of conversations: "I'm hungry." "Well, I disagree. I'm not hungry. Still, I respect your right to your different perspective." What different perspective? We're not disagreeing at all!

Taking Morality Seriously. Remember, what started us off is that there is disagreement and we feel *troubled* by it. The relativist says, you needn't feel troubled; just treat morality like a different kind of etiquette, albeit a kind people take much more seriously. But that's in a way the problem. How *can* we take it so seriously if morality is just a matter of conventional rules of conduct that we happen to have made up for ourselves?

5. Reconsidering Moral Objectivism

Perhaps we should take a second look at moral objectivism. The worry was that objectivism is going to lead to moral skepticism, and that skepticism is going to lead to paralysis and inaction. But maybe that was too quick. The original impetus for relativism is the dramatic moral disagreement that we seemed to find between various cultures. But perhaps there is less disagreement than might seem.

Explaining Away. Remember society's customs are a function of more than their values. Their factual and religious beliefs, as well as their circumstances, matter too.

Survival Values: So at least some apparent differences in values can be explained away. But we can also make a *positive* argument: cultures must have *some* values in common, namely the ones without which a society would not be able to sustain itself.

However: moral objectivism has some of its own problems:

Moral skepticism: If our own cultural norms may well be deeply misguided, where do we begin to think about morality? How can we ever be sure we are tracking the moral truth? And if we can't be sure we're tracking the moral truth, on what basis could we begin to criticize others? It might seem that moral objectivism, then, provides no better basis for criticism than moral relativism.

"Queerness" of moral "facts": Physical facts are relatively straightforward: we know what it is for something to have weight, mass, color, etc. But sorts of things are "moral facts"? How does one detect a moral fact? If we live in a physical universe, is there any room in it for moral facts?

So: what can we learn from the fact of moral variation between cultures? First, *some* of what we call right and wrong might not be a matter of objective moral truth, but just a matter of local custom, more along the lines of traffic laws than laws against murder. But second, this is

compatible with there being large areas of our moral lives in which there are genuine moral laws; universal truths about how to conduct ourselves.

6. Questions to think about:

- What about the moral disagreements? Aren't there areas of moral life that cannot be understood relativistically (i.e., on the model of etiquette), but in which there is still disagreement? How should we think of, e.g., disagreements over vegetarianism, religious toleration, sexism, homophobia, abortion? Is there an objective moral truth in these domains or not? How can we determine whether it is an objective domain or not? And if it is, how do we find the answer?
- Is it possible to draw a clear distinction between facts and values? E.g., in describing something as "beef" or "pork" or even more generally "meat", isn't one representing it from a particular evaluative viewpoint (e.g., from the point of view of a non-vegetarian)? In saying, "That's beef," is one making a "purely" factual claim? In saying, "That's a slice of dead cow," is one making a "purely" factual claim? What about, "That's a lie," or "He's a bigot"?
- Are there other arguments to support MMR besides arguments from moral diversity?