

A PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW ON ETHICAL RELATIVISM

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Abstract

This research work addresses the problem created by moral relativism, by trying to deny the existence of objective moral truth. For the moral relativist, the idea of comparison of moral value among people, communities and epoch should not even come into play, since every individual, community and culture has the right to adopt any moral value that is suitable to them. For relativist, the idea of morality flows from our ancestors who selected those actions that make them happy as good and those that cause pain as bad, hence, morality for the relativist becomes an emotional activity rather than a rational one. This work therefore tries as much as possible to ask some necessary questions on the viewpoints of moral relativist so as to bring out their lapses. Nevertheless, this work could be said to be a philosophical criticism of moral relativism.

Keywords: Ethical Relativism, Morality, Emotion, Culture, Happiness

Introduction

This work looks into the moral philosophical school of thought known as moral relativism. The moral relativist holds that moral judgment are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint (for instances, that of a culture or a historical period) and that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others. It has often been associated with other claims about morality: notably, the thesis that different culture often exhibits radically different moral values; the denial that there are universal moral values shared by every human society; and the insistence that we should refrain from passing moral judgments on belief and practice characteristic of culture other than our own.

Relativism views of morality first found expression in 5th century Greece, but they remained largely dormant until 19th and 20th centuries. During this time, a number of factors converged to make moral relativism appear plausible. These included a new appreciation of cultural diversity prompted by anthropological discoveries; the declining importance of religion in modernized societies; an increasingly critical attitude toward colonialism and its assumption of moral superiority over the colonized societies; and growing skepticism toward any form of moral objectivism, given the difficulty of providing value judgments the way ones prove factual claims.

Critics claim that relativists typically exaggerate the degree of diversity among culture since superficial differences often mask underlying shared agreements. In fact, some say that there is a core set of universal values that any human culture must endorse if it is to flourish: Moral relativists are also accused of inconsistently claiming that there are no universal moral norms

while appealing to a principle of tolerance as a universal norm. In the eyes of many critics, though, the most serious objection to moral relativism is that it implies the pernicious consequence that “anything goes”: slavery is just according to the norms of a slave society; sexist practices are right according to the values of a sexist culture. Without some sort of non-relative standard to appeal to, the critics argue, we have no basis for critical moral appraisals of our own culture's conventions, or for judging one society to be better than another.

In the school of thought known as moral relativism, the following branches could be identified; descriptive relativism, cultural relativism, ethical non-realism, ethical non-cognitivism, meta-ethical relativism, normative relativism, and moral relativism. Among these branches of moral relativism, the most dominant one and the particular one which presents the strong debate in moral relativism is the cultural relativism. As such most of the discussion that shall be made in this work shall be made under the cultural relativism.

Moral Relativism

Moral relativism means that moral statement cannot be inferred from or reduced to generally applicable statements. Instead, moral statements are relative, for instance, to individuals, their opinions, times and places, conventions, or still something else. It can be construed as consisting of the necessary components. In general, moral relativism is a three-pronged view such that: X is relative to Y, where X is an aspect of the moral phenomenon and where there is irrevocable variation in Y¹. Each component is explained with an example below.

First, one can take moral relativism to mean that some aspect of moral statements (e.g. their truth) or morally relevant acts (e.g. their moral rightness) is relative to a moral framework.² Consider the following example, inspired by Lyons³. Assume that pro-choice activists endorse a moral framework that prioritizes the value of personal choice over the value of the unborn life. According to some kind of moral relativism, a pro-choice activist-say, Jane-can correctly judge the abortion is permissible because it is in accordance with her moral framework. Nonetheless, if a pro-life activist-say, Claudia-abhors abortion, Claudia's statement regarding the impermissibility of abortion is also true because it is in accordance with Claudia's moral framework that, prioritizes the value of life over that of choice.

Secondly, Moral relativism also holds that there are variations in these moral frameworks. In the examples above, some are pro-choice and others are pro-life. Some of their moral judgment will therefore differ because their respective moral framework differs.

Finally, this variation in moral framework cannot be entirely eliminated. Assume that the truth of moral statements is relative to the moral framework one endorse, and that different individuals adhere to different moral frameworks. If it is the case that a pro-choice framework is, for example; epistemically better, than a pro-life framework, then the statement: 'abortion is wrong' becomes false no matter who made it. If moral relativism would allow that all variation in moral frameworks could be eliminated, moral relativism would be compatible with (most forms of) moral universalism. This meaning of moral relativism would be too broad to be useful. Thus, moral relativism is better taken to hold that many moral frameworks

are epistemically or normatively equivalent.

For the relativist, there are no universal cross-cultural ethical norms. They hold that there are only norms that a particular society sets up, and these norms vary greatly from one society to another. They are of the opinion that the right and wrong are defined by each culture, and that what a given culture defines as right really is right for that culture, even though it may be the only culture in the world with such a view. The case for ethical relativism rests chiefly on two sets of considerations: a set of anthropological facts and a set of methodological assumptions. It is these two arguments that make up defence for moral relativism.

A) Anthropological Facts: The central anthropological fact is *the existence of cultural diversity*. A review of anthropological studies has shown a great diversity among different human societies (especially in moral practice). The moral relativists therefore claim that such difference exist because there are no universal ethical norms to which all societies can look up to for guidance in evaluating their acts.

If there were universal norms, then surely we could expect some fundamental ethical uniformity among various human societies. But no such uniformity exists. For this reason, they conclude that there are no universal norms.

The next argument under the anthropological facts is *Cultural origin of values*. This holds that human beings develop their beliefs and values within a social context. That follows that humans are not born with a set of values, but are acquired step by step, through an encounter with people who make up the society. This follows that values are but products of societal customs. These customs are based on emotions of pain and pleasure that a society in its collective wisdom associates with various actions.

This is the only explanation why there are difference in the values of different societies and why there should be or there is no universal accepted values. Therefore, different ancestral emotional responses, say the relativist, account much better for different current moral beliefs than to assumed universal moral norms.

The third argument in this line of thought is the *Pervasiveness of ethnocentrism*. Many people at different times and places have concluded and believed that their moral values and culture are more superior to those of the other people. Such beliefs as would be stated by the relativist are only based on the knowledge that a culture's morality is perfectly compatible with certain absolute moral norms. Those beliefs spring instead from the respect for one's culture that society has instilled in its people from early childhood. The growth of this respect into feelings of superiority is what is known as phenomenon of ethnocentrism.

B) Methodological Case: in this argument, the relativists appeal to methodological issues. The first issue holds that because the meanings of moral concepts cannot be understood outside the moral system of a specific culture. The concept of good may mean the compliance to the prescription of the gods, while it may mean the compliance to the laws of the land for another society. One therefore cannot stand within one society's moral system and understand

the meanings of the key concepts of a different society's morality. If this is the case, then cross-cultural evaluations become doubly impossible. The case here for the relativists is not only the denial of universal moral norms by which all cultures can be judged, but also that no one really know another society's moral concepts that is essential for passing judgement on that society's morality.

The next argument here involves claims that the basis for justifying moral obligation varies from culture to culture. For this reason, the relativist argue that it is foolish to expect that all persons can have an answer to the question 'what ought I to do'? That will be acceptable to all the people. This moves them to say that we do not have a universally agreed upon ways of demonstrating what one ought to do.

Attraction in Relativism

Attitude of tolerance: seems to promote tolerance. The relativist position comes along side with it humility (“I can't say my views are right for everybody, although they are right for me”). “Live and let live” is the watch word of relativism and it is against the dogmatism point of view found in universalism. The relativist beliefs that the ultimate truth about things may not be totally known, as such, one should keep pursuing a better understanding of the true, the good and the beautiful.

M.J Herskovits on Relativism

Herskovits maintains that what is desirable varies from society. For him, this is the cause of conflicting moral evaluation. Example presented in support of this point is the polygamous family issue; which some societal culture abhors and others find it normal among themselves. His conclusion therefore is, “evaluations are relative to the cultural background of which they arise”.⁴

The clash of personalities should not be underestimated where persons of different individual backgrounds are brought into such close and continuous contact. Polygamy when looked at from the point of those who practice it, is seen to hold values that are not apparent from the outside. What is true of a particular phase of culture such as this, is also true of others. Evaluations are relative to the culture background out of which they arise.

Attitude results from enculturation. In the above argument, Herskovits concluded that how one evaluates such an arrangement depends on attitudes instilled by one's own culture. Enculturation, he calls it, but not only our ethical attitudes the product of our enculturation. Enculturation therefore determines our attitudes toward a host of other things as well.

The principle of cultural relativism derives from a vast array of factual data guard from the application of techniques to penetrate the underlying value-system of societies having diverse customs. This principle, briefly stated, is as follows: judgment is based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his enculturation.⁵

No culture, however, is a closed system, a series of rigid moods to which the behavior of all

members of a society must conform. In stressing the psychological reality of culture, as such, can do nothing. It is therefore in its very nature, but the summation of the behavior and habitual modes of thought of person who, at a given time and in a given place, make up a particular society. These person, as individuals, though by learning and habit they conform to the ways of the groups into which they have been born, nonetheless vary in their reactions to the situations of living they commonly meet.

Norms and normality vary. Herskovits has claimed the anthropological research has provided ample of evidence of cultural relativism, which he understands as the view that a person's concepts, judgments and attitudes based on experience which, in turn, is interpreted in the light of that person's cultural conditioning (enculturation). These concepts, judgments, and attitudes include the norms and values that an individual is taught from infancy, notice even how easily we assume that norms and normal in one culture may be very different from the norms of other culture. In other words, the normal varies considerably from one culture to another.

Objections on Relativism

A. Questions Arising from Relativist's View

These questions coming up from the argument of relativism as presented by Herskovits shall be taken one after the other.

Question 1: Herskovits pointed out that the relativist tries to understand the validity of every morality within its appropriate social group. Such an understanding, he says, breeds tolerance for prospective other than the one's own. But how far would he press this tolerance? Would he go too far as to respect and tolerate a culture that engages in human sacrifice? That pursues racial genocide? That uses terrorism as a routine means of achieving desired goal? Is it really the case that respect for every culture's morality means endorsing equally every cultures morality?

Question 2; he distinguishes between cultural “absolutes” and cultural “universals”. Applying his distinction to ethics one could say that ethical universals values that seem to be recognized by all cultures even though the ways in which those values are expressed, saved, and enforced vary from culture to culture. Does he allow for the existence of ethical universal? Certainly, he says that *Cultural Universal exist*, such as, morality, the enjoyment of beauty, and a standard for truth. That is to say, all peoples have some sort of morality. But is there universal agreement about some values within morality? Do all people value some similar things as good? Would not such an ethical universal be similar to universal ethical norms? Would not the affirmation of ethical universals be inconsistent with ethical relativism?

Question 3: Herskovits wishes to distinguish clearly between cultural relativism and individual, personal relativism. The former will affirm that individuals within a culture are legitimately assessed in terms of the standard of that culture. The latter would each individual

the determiner of morality, and that form of relativism Herskovits rejects. On what basis, however, does Herskovits accept cultural relativism and rejects individual relativism? Does he not maintain that the other one leads to social stability and should be affirmed, whereas the other leads to social chaos and should be rejected? If so, what would be his attitude towards a social reformer who opposes society's customs and laws for the sake of higher morality than that which society's customs and laws for the sake of higher morality than that which society currently acknowledges?

B. Problematic Consequences of Relativism

Water Stace (1886-1967) was one of those who strongly opposed relativism. He acknowledges that one of the difficulties the ethical relativism would be devastating as it would only end in destroying the conception of morality altogether, in undermining its practical efficacy, in rendering meaningless many almost universally accepted truths about human affairs, in robbing human beings of any incentive to strive for a better world, in taking the life-blood out of every ideal and every inspiration which has ever ennobled the life of man. He maintains that the charge against relativism is that it revolts and outrages man's moral feeling.⁶

The arguments of relativism are mainly pragmatic, an appeal to feelings which have no logical and scientific values. At this level, the problems found in relativism are going to be considered.

The first effect of ethical relativism would be to render meaningless any cross-cultural moral comparisons. No matter how depraved a society's attitude might be the Nazi's attitudes towards Jews, South African's official policy of apartheid, a society's official endorsement of terrorism as a political weapon, the list could go on and on – the ethical relativist in our society would not have any grounds on which to condemn such attitudes. Why? Because, in the relativist view, there are no cross-cultural standards to which one could appeal. The relativists hold that there is no common standard which can be applied to the various civilizations in the different societies. For any such comparison of moral standards implies the existence of some superior standards which is applicable to every society.

The second consideration in the objection is that relativism makes impossible even the comparison of different epochs within the same culture. A trial in the comparison of the ethical standard of our time and that our ancestors, we may find out that theirs were more barbaric than ours. This comparison will present the stand of the relativist to be unreasonable, for they believe that there is no possibility of comparison among societal ethical standards.

The third objection to relativism is that it makes the whole idea of moral progress meaningless, since it is not sensible in their view to make comparison in the ethical standards of different epochs. Then, it will not be possible to speak about moral progress.

The objection number four on relativism is that it tends to produce moral anarchy. The view that one moral view is just as legitimate as any other, that anything goes. This is as a result of

the serious difficulty of defining what one means by “social group”. The relativist maintains that the ethical question, what ought I to do? Must be restated into form, within the context of my social group, what ought I to do? But what is one's social group? Does everyone who lives in a nation subscribe to the same moral standards? The relativists encounter difficulties when pressed to identify the meaning of the term *social group*. Perhaps the only group that affirms exactly the same moral standards I do is a group of one person-i-if so, I alone determine what is right and wrong; and so does everyone else. If such is so, there is then an ethical anarchy where conflicts of interest are not settled by an appeal to an acknowledged cross-group standard. In such case, might makes right and as such, there could not be said to be standard morality among such a group of people.

Even if it were possible to identify a moral relativist social group, the relativist's problem is not solved. Within a social group, however defined, complete agreement on moral attitudes is unlikely to be present. When complete agreement is lacking, how does one decide what really is the standard of the group? Either one takes the majority opinion, or goes with the minority. If one takes the majority view, then one must judge all social reformers to be misfits. But if one takes the minority opinion, then such a person seems to be led into individualism and moral anarchy. Such is the dilemma of the relativists.

The problem with relativism is the sixth argument is that it has a disastrous effect on human conduct. Relativism breeds the kind of indifference towards the actions of others that allows those other groups to do terrible things to people without the relativist raising an objection or striking a defensive blow.

Conclusion

Over the years, moral relativism has attracted a great deal of criticism, and not just from professional philosophers. One reason for this, of course, is that it is widely perceived to be a way of thinking that is on the rise. Indeed, by the end of the 20th century it had become a common place among teachers of moral philosophy that the default view of morality held by the majority of university students was some form of moral relativism. Another reason why there are many criticisms against moral relativism is that a relativistic view of morality is thought by many to have pernicious consequences. The policies built on moral relativism do not promote objective values, the resulting moral relativism tends instead to produce frustration, despair, selfishness and disregard for life and liberty of others.

Endnotes

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⁴ M.J. Herskovits, *Man and His Work: The Science of Cultural Anthropology*, New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1947.

⁵ M.J. Herskovits, *Man and His Work: The Science of Cultural Anthropology*, New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1947.

⁶ Walter Stace, *The Concept of Morals*, London: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1937.