

Appendix C: Cultural Relativism

Throughout the history of Philosophy there have been many theorists who endorse some form of relativism. As an example, consider the ancient Sophists, in particular Protagoras. Although a comprehensive view of Protagoras' teaching is not available to us, we do know some of his general viewpoints. Protagoras seems to have been a teacher of rhetoric, that is to say persuasive argumentation. Apparently, he would hold what we would know call debates and win decisively. He would then charge a fee for instruction on how to employ these rhetorical skills.

One of Protagoras most memorable teachings is that "Man is the measure of all things." Surely, Protagoras meant "humans" here, so we can take the meaning of this sentence to be that the way things are perceived by the individual just is the way things actually are for the individual. In other words, what you see is what really exists (for you). If you judge an action to be wrong, that action (for all subjective intents and purposes) just is wrong for you. This claim can be generalized, as it is in one of Plato's dialogues (*Theaetetus*), to mean more generally that what makes an action morally right is not some objective status that the action has; but rather it is the society that deems it right or wrong. If the society, as a collective, overall judges an action to be right (or permissible), then that action is morally right.¹

Gilbert Harman (2012) provides for us a more modern example of moral relativism. He argues that the only reason one is compelled to behave in accordance with certain moral rules is not because these moral rules reflect some objective moral values that must be observed. Rather, we are motivated to observe moral rules because there is an implicit agreement in our society that such rules are to be followed. So the only reason one would have to conform to those rules is if one, in fact, belongs to the society in question. In other words, morality comes from the society you live in; that is why you feel a motivation to follow the relevant set of norms. There are no objective moral values.

It's time now to draw a distinction between two camps. On the one hand, there are what we will call objectivists (a.k.a. moral realists). Objectivism is the view there really do exist objective, mind-independent moral values; there is a real right and wrong and we must endeavor to behave in accordance with these values. On the other hand there

¹ Protagoras' own view is more elusive. Not because it is incomprehensible but because scholars must piece together his view from interpretations of other philosophers, e.g., Plato. It is unclear exactly what Protagoras' view was.

are non-objectivists (a.k.a. moral anti-realists). Non-objectivism is the view that there are no objective moral values; moral values are, instead, mind-dependent. There is no moral realm which houses objective moral values.²

Just like objectivism serves as an umbrella term which captures many theories and perspectives (for example Kantianism, Utilitarianism, and Virtue Theory are all objectivist theories), non-objectivism has many different varieties. We will consider primarily cultural relativism here.

Interestingly enough, one of the modern pushes for moral relativism comes, not from philosophers, but from anthropologists. As European scholars began travelling across the globe during the Age of Imperialism, they have been fascinated by the peculiarities of what they called “primitive” cultures. Various forms of sexual unions, burial rituals, societal hierarchies, and artistic norms, just to name a few, have intrigued explorers and anthropologists, although they didn’t really quite agree with them. In a sense, they always maintained an air of superiority. They knew, of course, that their way of life back home is the “right” way to live; nevertheless, it was in the interest of their field to survey and try to understand the cultures which they studied. That was the case, at least, until the 20th century, when many scholars began to assert that there is no objective criteria by which to judge one culture better than another, including the realm of moral norms.³ This is the beginning of modern cultural relativism (Brown 2008: 364-5).

This is a good place to make another distinction. Moral relativism can be considered a cluster of ideas. For our purposes, we will focus on two. There is a descriptive dimension to relativism. This is the one that many anthropologists picked out. What these scholars noticed is that there is, in fact, many marked differences in the moral codes that different cultures practice. That is to say, there is moral disagreement.

² There are some notable exceptions to the distinction between objectivism and non-objectivism. One of these is David Wong (1996). Wong has a mixed position. Wong believes that it may be the case that more than one morality, or set of moral norms, can be true. In other words, there do exist different moral codes in different cultures and societies. However, there are some restrictions on what moral codes can be acceptable. For example, some moral codes just aren’t good because they don’t endorse a good way of life. Consider a moral code that endorses resolving differences via decapitation (or slavery, or genocide) is not likely to survive, perhaps because its adherents would die off, or its adherents would be forced to assimilate to another culture’s moral code, etc.

³ Most notably, readers can refer to Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead for evidence of the prevalence of moral relativism in anthropology. Benedict’s “Patterns of Culture” and Mead’s “Coming of Age in Samoa” and “Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies” are recommended. Per Brown (2008: 364-5) it is unlikely that Boas, the teacher of Benedict and Mead, was himself a relativist.

There is not one uniform moral code across the planet, but rather various, seemingly conflicting codes. This descriptive dimension does not prescribe what moral code you should follow. It merely posits that there are many codes.

There is, however, also a meta-ethical aspect to moral relativism relevant here. This meta-ethical claim is a much stronger claim, the sort philosophers of ethics are more prone to making. The claim is that there is, in fact, no rational way of resolving conflicts between various moral codes. One culture's moral code is incommensurable to another culture's moral code. This is so since morality arises for reasons independent of objective moral values. They are constructed independently by each culture, and hence moral disagreements are not the sort of thing that you can resolve through rational discourse via the use of objective criteria. There is no objective criteria through which interlocutors can come to an agreement. Hence, there is no resolving of moral conflicts between adherents of different cultures, since there is no shared moral framework.

I hope that this distinction is clear, but I'll give it one more try to make sure. There is a weaker claim that states the following: "Look! There are many different cultures in the world with different moral codes. Moreover, the moral code of one culture often conflicts with the moral code of another." The stronger claim, the meta-ethical claim, goes further than the descriptive claim. It claims that in principle, a resolution to moral conflicts (as in conflicts between different moral codes from different cultures) is fundamentally impossible since there is no common moral framework, no shared preliminary assumptions about morality.

Importantly, one need not subscribe to both claims to be a cultural relativist; one can subscribe to a *weak* version of the view (only the descriptive claim) or a *strong* version of the view (the meta-ethical claim, usually also including the descriptive claim).

Now it is not the case that the descriptive aspects of relativism entail the meta-ethical aspects of the theory. For example, it could be the case two seemingly incommensurable moral codes only have outwardly manifestations that seem radically different, but in fact they have a common core of moral values. In other words, two cultures only appear to have major differences, but in reality they agree on essential moral concepts, like the objection to murder. Theorists like Donald Davidson (1984) argue that the sorts of disagreements that we see between different cultures actually presuppose an extensive agreement between the two cultures. For this reason, Davidson argues that the weak descriptive claim can't be true—most cultures actually agree on a variety of fundamental, core values; this fundamental agreement is what

magnifies the minor disagreements. Davidson goes further and claims that this makes the stronger meta-ethical claim untenable as well.

We could track the Davidsonian argument and see how it is also an attack on the strong claim, but I don't think this is necessary. The Davidsonian argument does not seem to refute the weak claim. The way that Davidson makes his argument is by drawing an analogy to translating between different languages. What makes translation possible, in particular translation between very different languages, is the assumption we make that the two relevant languages/cultures agree on most things. For example, if I wanted to translate a small paragraph from English to Mandarin, I would assume a certain common core of similarities between the two cultures that speak the relevant languages.

Now then, let's suppose the paragraph is about birds. The first things I naturally assume is that Chinese people are also familiar with birds. They must also realize that birds most of the time, it seems, fly. But there are also some birds that don't fly. Sometimes they just sit around even though they can fly. They chirp. They come in different colors and sizes. They are sometimes eaten, too. The fact that we, the English speakers, and the Chinese have these fundamental agreements allows me to translate the paragraph about birds *and* assume that they will be able to read and understand my translation. That is to say, they will read the word that the paragraph is about (which I hopefully got right), and confirm my translation by reading all the subsequent descriptions I gave of the concept in question, like that it can fly, comes in different colors, chirps, etc. If, however, the paragraph would violate too many of their conceptions about birds, they might begin to assume that maybe the paragraph isn't about birds, but about horses instead. But it is only to the great deal of things in common that they can correctly ascertain that the paragraph is about birds.

There, of course, might be some disagreement. Consider that perhaps the Chinese birds have decided to stop chirping since the publication of this *Appendix C: Cultural Relativism*. Now the claim that birds chirp is a point of contention between the two cultures. But yet the translation was possible because there was so much agreement on all other counts. That is Davidson's strategy for demonstrating that there must be fundamental agreement between cultures— showing that disagreement is only possible due to the common assumptions between cultures, which are far more numerous than the disagreements. This, at first glance, seems tenable. After all, translation is possible. This then, Davidson argues, is the same for morality. There are, of course, some clear differences in moral codes. But these differences are accessible to us only because of the great set of commonalities between the two cultures.

Does this analogy from language translation to moral norms hold? This is very controversial and many philosophers think it does not (for example, see Gowans 2004: 144-6). I will show you the critique of the Davidsonian argument via some humor. Consider instead of translating a paragraph on birds, translating a joke:

“Knock knock.” “Who’s there?” “Boo.” “Boo who?” “Don’t cry.”

Now you may or may not have found that funny, (but hopefully at least one person did). Would you be able to translate this joke to have the same desired result? (A mild chuckle, I suppose.) It’s not clear that this is attainable. You see for the first example, birds, there is a great deal of agreement with regards to birds. Everyone can see or can learn about birds quite easily. So translation of that sort looks to be both facile and uneventful. But humor is a completely different thing. What is humorous to people varies dramatically. What is humorous to one person, is extremely offensive to another. There is, then, no great set of commonalities in this case. Translation (or more correctly in this case, an explanation as to why that is funny) is not as easily attainable in this case. What if morality is like this? If that’s the case, there need not be a wide set of common assumptions. Davidson’s argument would be null in the case of morality because morality, unlike birds, is not a natural concept, concepts that denote things that occur naturally in the world, like water, birds, and wind. Morality, perhaps, is an artificial construct, just like the relativists say.

Here’s a likely response from an objectivist seeking to refute the weak claim. This critique comes from Philippa Foot (2002). It goes something like the following. It’s not the case that not just anything can be morally permissible; there is still considerable agreement among different cultures about what is just plain wrong. This, then, is demonstrative of objective moral values.

The following example illustrates this point nicely. Here in the West, we seem to have conflicting moral claims with those in India. Particularly, we find it perfectly permissible to eat cows, while they (at least strict Hindus) do not. But this is not because cows have some special status per se. It is because Hindus believe in reincarnation. Moreover, they believe it is possible that their ancestors may have been reincarnated as a cow. If that’s the case, then the West and the Hindus do agree. After all, neither culture endorses the eating of another person! So the disagreement is not fundamentally a moral disagreement. It is a disagreement on the metaphysical status

of persons through generations. The main point here is, of course, that different cultures agree on the most fundamental of issues, like the prohibition on murder.⁴

This argument, again, seems *prima facie* correct. There does seem to be agreement at least on the prohibition on murder. But if we inquire further, this does not seem entirely tenable. First of all, this is quite a step back from Davidson's claim that there is a wide set of common assumptions between cultures. Foot is claiming, at least in my example, that there is at least a few core prohibitions, like the one on murder. But is this prohibition on murder as clear-cut as it seems?

Consider the practices of Western countries vis-a-vis convicted murderers. Some countries believe that it is morally impermissible to condemn these criminals to capital punishment, that is to say kill them. Other countries, like the United States, find it permissible to end the lives of their convicted murders via lethal injection and even firing squad, which was recently deemed legal once again in the state of Utah. This shows that the prohibition on murder can be interpreted in many ways. In addition to capital punishment, there is disagreement on what constitutes war crimes, whether or not drone strikes are permissible, and the question of abortion is murder or not. Just what murder is is far from unambiguous.

Here's another critique to the weak, descriptive claim: Cultures are not homogenous; in fact, there is great dissent between individual members of a culture with regards to what is permissible and what is not. This shows moral codes are not constructed by societies.

This is a good point, and seems to be intuitively true. However, doesn't it seem like this critique might actually work against objectivism too? If people disagree even with the same general moral framework, why should we assume that there is an objective moral realm? It looks like everyone just has their own viewpoints. This seems to support some sort of subjectivism with regards to morality.⁵

Let's move on to the strong claim; call it meta-ethical moral relativism (MMR). MMR is the claim that moral disputes between cultures with different moral frameworks are fundamentally irresolvable through rational means alone. This is quite the claim. It certainly feels like we should be able to come to an agreement about moral values. We

⁴ This argument is closely related to another critique to the weak claim. It goes as follows: Most societies agree about moral values, but they disagree about other aspects, for example how to bring about the prescribed results, or who deserves rights, etc.

⁵ More on subjectivism in my course PHIL 103: Ethics and Society.

feel strongly that our side is correct and the other is mistaken. Let's put the onus of responsibility on the endorser of MMR. In other words, the proponent of MMR needs to demonstrate that moral disagreements cannot be rationally resolved.

Here, the proponent of MMR might interject to clarify his/her point. Moral agreements, the proponent of MMR claims, *can* be resolved; in particular, disputes can be resolved when the two interlocutors share a moral framework. However, when the two do not share a moral framework, there is no rational resolution.

The example of the holy cows of India will serve as a clarificatory example here as well. In this case, there is a common moral framework. The Hindu, like the Westerner, believes that eating another person is wrong. The resolution only came about after the Hindu explained her reasoning for ascribing special status to cows. This is a rational resolution. It might be the case that the Westerner does not agree with the special status of cows, but that is a non-moral claim. It is, rather, a metaphysical claim tied to Hinduism (namely, that the cow might be an ancestor).

However, Westerners and Hindus do not have an entirely compatible moral framework. Broadly speaking, Hindus do not find it morally supererogatory to marry and have kids; rather Hindu culture more or less sees this as a moral mandate. After this period of family life, Hindus devote the next period of their life to focus on spiritual matters. This is called the *vanaprastha*. This is a period of greater emphasis on meditation and other religious rituals. In fact, in the period after this, called *samnyasa*, it is perfectly acceptable to retreat from the world entirely and focus entirely on spiritual liberation. Again this is not only morally permissible, but to some degree it is morally mandated.

In the West, on the other hand, it is becoming increasingly obvious that marriage is not at all a moral mandate. More and more young people are refusing to marry and instead living with their romantic partner informally. More and more young couples are also not having children. And of course, a life of meditation seems peculiar to the Western mind. Westerners, in particular Americans, work no average more hours per day, more days per year, and more years per lifetime than many other societies. In fact, many consider this Protestant work ethics to be a moral mandate. Can these different views in acceptable lifestyles be rationally reconciled?

The proponent of MMR says no. At best, a Westerner can claim that his lifestyle is better than the Hindu; "more productive" she might say. The Hindu can counter that a spiritual life is the best sort of life. It is not clear how these two viewpoints can be

rationally resolved. Does it seem, then, that MMR is true? Is there no rational solution to disputes between moral frameworks?

An objectivist can respond in the following way: “Altering someone’s framework can be rational. All one has to do is demonstrate that one’s framework is superior to their interlocutor’s framework.”

How would one do this? Presumably one would have to construct a consistent moral theory that endorses one lifestyle over another. Some examples of such purportedly consistent moral theories are Kantianism and Utilitarianism. However, we’ve already seen that robust moral theories often have ambiguities as well counterintuitive results. Moreover, we have not found a way to resolve the differences between the two objective moral theories in question, Kantianism and Utilitarianism. It doesn’t seem the demonstration of a superior moral framework is as clear as the objectivist supposes that it is.

Here’s another argument against MMR: If a moral theory cannot resolve moral conflicts, then it is untenable. MMR cannot resolve moral conflicts. Therefore, MMR is untenable. The response here is foreseeable. This same argument can be used against objectivism. Consider Utilitarianism. Scholars debate to this day about certain ambiguities within the principle of utility. Consider some cases where the principle of utility is not action-guiding; that is to say, think of times when utilitarianism does not favor one action over another since they have the same net pleasure. What is the utilitarian to do? The principle of utility does not inform us on how to resolve this conflict. Does this mean that utilitarianism is untenable?

Lastly, a strong line of argument against strong cultural relativism, I think, comes from moral skeptics in particular moral error theorists. The moral error theorists are to morality what atheists are to religion. The basic idea is this: all moral assertions are false. This is because moral assertions lack a truth-maker. Moral assertions lack a truth-maker because all moral properties are mind-dependent. Morality is just a product of cultural evolution that likely played an important role during our evolutionary history; but it is still just a construct—a useful fiction.

Some skeptics go further and claim that the usefulness of moral discourse has expired. These are known as moral abolitionists (see Garner and Joyce 2019). It is from these abolitionists that the challenge to cultural relativism comes from. They might argue that modern strong cultural relativism seems to have grown out of the moral panic after World War I (see Brown 2008: 364-5). This motivated intellectuals to give the gift

of truth to cultural frameworks: the moral claim is true *for them*. But although cultural evolution clearly played an important role in the development of norms, it is **unnecessary** to assign them some notion of relativist truth. For this notion of relative truth is not easily found elsewhere in intellectual discourse. You might perhaps find the notion of relative truth in aesthetics, but aesthetics does not often facilitate decisions on matters of life and death (as moral discourse does). So the abolitionist would say that we should abandon the notion of relative truth *and* say that all moral claims are false: it's all a fiction. After all, it is this notion of relative truth that has led Western intellectuals (some of them feminists) to tacitly accept some cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, bride kidnapping, bans on female driving, and child marriage.

References

- Brown, M. F., Darnell, R., Eriksen, T. H., Hayden, R. M., Moore, H. L., Myers, F., ... & Brown, M. F. (2008). Cultural Relativism 2.0. *Current Anthropology*, 49(3), 363–383.
- Davidson, D., 1984, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” in Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 183–98. Original Publication Date: 1973–74.
- Foot, P. “Morality and Art,” in Foot, *Moral Dilemmas and Other Topics in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 5–19, Original Publication Date: 1972.
- Garner, R., & Joyce, R. (2018). *The end of morality: Taking moral abolitionism seriously*. Routledge.
- Gowans, C. 2004, “A *Priori* Refutations of Disagreement Arguments against Moral Objectivity: Why Experience Matters,” *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 38: 141–57.
- Harman, G. (2012). Moral relativism explained. *Problems of Goodness. New Essays in Metaethics*.
- Wong, D.B., 1996, “Pluralistic Relativism,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: Moral Concepts*, 20: 378–399.