

RESPONDING TO ETHICAL RELATIVITY

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Relativity in ethics seems sensible because (a) incompatible moral beliefs and practices exist, and (b) no one seems able to establish a universal basis for ethical theory.

In response to the second point, (1) the presence of a universal God (creator, sustainer, intervener) provides that universal basis. It does so because he had purpose in creating and if he has created us in his image. Furthermore, (2) human nature is universal for humans. We should not do what is contrary to human nature physically, psychologically, and socially; we should practice what enhances well-being, peace, and unity under God's values. Presumably there is a hierarchy of what yields greater or lesser satisfaction, gratification, peace, and happiness, according to how well actions correlate with the givens of human nature—matters like the desire to be loved, the drive for worth, the urge for security, the impulse for innocence.

We can ask why we do not choose to do what contributes toward greater self-fulfillment and social satisfaction. The answer corresponds with the reasons we yield to temptation. (a) Immediate gratification rather than delayed gratification takes its toll because our perceivable situation seems more “real” than the distant time, place, or realm (the eschatological, the supernatural). (b) Rationalization comes in when we play the odds and suppose that what comes to others will not happen to me. (c) Social pressure has its effect because we are often more sensitive to the influence of the many than of the few in trying to foster acceptance. (d) Ignorance affects our choices when we do not realize that a better way of exists for bringing human joy. Finally, (e) we maintain low expectations because we have no hope of breaking out of our less than satisfying condition. No one seems to be around that will provide that better circumstance.

Life is structured in a way that makes it easier to do what brings less satisfaction than to do what brings more long-term fulfillment. Playing basketball is more satisfying than being a couch potato. It is easier to respond to the immediate situation, but delayed gratification is usually more gratifying. It is easier to deal with physical matters, but transcendent psychological fulfillment makes for a better life. It is easier to act in our own interests, but responding to someone's thoughtfulness is more rewarding.

The fact that mutually exclusive moral practices exist or the fact that people have not come to agreement on a universal ethical basis does not work against ethical theory. Those practical observations merely reflect human imperfection, which is the very problem ethics addresses. Human failures in moral behavior are not reasons for having no way to measure moral behavior. “What is” does not determine “What ought.” christir.org