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Critical Analysis Rough Draft

Moral relativism is one of the more complex questions when it comes to ethical analysis. Stemming from the concept that it addresses the actions of others on a moral scale that the analyzers are not already familiar with. In order to properly gauge whether an action can be considered moral or not, we must understand the context in which it happens. Anthropology and the Abnormal is a writing by Ruth Fulton Benedict that describes moral relativism in the light of psychology and sociology. It is these lenses that should be addressed when arguing for moral relativism and its expansive uses throughout all societies.

In order to appropriately argue for moral relativism through these lenses, it is important to understand the differences between psychology and sociology. Psychology is the study and analysis of how individual people think and examining the reasoning behind it, while keeping it specific to the individual’s personal experiences. Meanwhile sociology is the study of how a society can alter a person’s perception of the world around them and how they very similar impacts on society. With these definitions in mind, the premise of societal and individual morals tends to become blurred. Moral relativism falls in this area where there are not necessarily any right or wrong answers, which is built on the idea that morals cannot logically be compared between different societies under different conditions.

One of the common arguments against the application of moral relativism is that it falls apart when attempting to find an absolute answer. That is, something that is objectively right or wrong. When only regarding one society or a smaller subnet of a culture, it is relatively simple to say that an action is right or wrong. However, when looking at the universe as a whole, there are people that simply do not agree with others even within the same societies. Fulton uses the example of a village found slightly northwest of Melanesia, where our society would classify all of their population as paranoid. They define their “normal” as magic makers that can pull from the nutrients of their neighbor’s soil in order to have a better personal crop, meaning those with successful growing seasons are nothing more than thieves. In addition, they also believe that any crop other than your own is poisonous to anyone that did not contribute to it. As a result, any man that should seek to help their neighbor will be labelled as an outcast and considered crazy. This seems so bizarre since it is backwards from what someone from a more westernized culture believes, but who is to say that this way of life is objectively wrong. Moral relativism applies marvelously as the people of that culture accept its guidelines as is, and others do not necessarily have to agree, disagree, or even understand it. A different way of life is acceptable so long as it allows for the continuation of the society.

Amongst many examples listed throughout Fulton’s writing, there is a very common theme. The idea that there is an infinite number of possibilities within not just an individual person, but amongst a society as well. Within this idea falls another great point that there could be an ideal society in theory, and all iterations of any real society are just adaptations of what is needed for that iteration to prosper. It seems as though this is Fulton’s argument when mentioning the behavior of the people of the Northwest Coast. People of the Northwest Coast believe that all death calls for revenge, no matter the cause. These people have accepted that this is a rule of life and moral relativism argues that others do not need to understand why they have fallen upon this agreement. With this in mind, it can further be said that similar to language, concepts of normalcy will vary to adapt to the society that they fall under. The only thing here that holds any sort of weight on making any sort of moral decisions is whether or not the society they fit into agree that they are moral or not. This can then be extended to those that fall outside of this society or culture, and as such can be classified as a prime example of moral relativism.

Overall, this definition of moral relativism is very sound. One of the key principles of moral relativism is that things do not necessarily have to make sense to another culture in order to function as intended. The supporting evidence here is that a relatively simple moral dilemma can be slightly altered in order to change the moral outcome within one setting, while justifying the dilemma in another context. In our society, we have the right and duty to protect ourselves and in doing so we may have to harm another individual. While this is not ideal, if it can be shown that the actions taken were in self defense rather than being instigated by the perpetrator of the killing, then our society deems it as a morally justified action. Meanwhile in another society they may say that simply because someone is attempting to harm another, does not mean that they can rightfully protect themselves. They could argue that material possessions are not more important than the human life that would be at stake for stealing. Despite this clear divide in societal ideals, moral relativism does not have to be that clearly divided. A great example of moral relativism at work in the current western society is the topic of abortion. Both sides believe that they are objectively in the right and are very unlikely to compromise. The pro-life side tends to believe that it is objectively immoral to stop a beating heart no matter the circumstances. Meanwhile the pro-choice typically believes that another person should not have control over what they can or cannot do with their own body, and in doing so the other person is objectively in the wrong. It can clearly be seen that societal splits happen within a single society quite often, which further pushes the idea that having an absolute moral compass in quite impossible.

The effects of sociology are very apparent; however, psychology also plays quite a key role in allowing for moral relativism to work at its best. The psychology of individuals allows for societal rules to be followed or denied. Without the psychological acceptance of a way of life, change in the of the individuals within society would ultimately lead to a change in the society itself. Fulton seems to not have really mentioned this idea that societies can be fluid. They will grow and adapt to new information, trends, and advancements in technology. Perhaps this concept of societies shifting moral compasses around a bit is more of a modern or westernized idea, but it is something that can be seen in many places in recent years. More traditional values such as marriage being strictly between a man and a woman are now outdated, and not many people would argue that gay marriage is unethical. It is because of this that some of Fulton’s ideas can seem somewhat outdated as well. As societies continue to evolve to adjust to the needs of the people, the people will also slowly converge on a relatively agreed upon moral rulebook. This is not to say that other societies need to change in order to meet the requirements of other societies, but instead that as people become more connected to each other with things like the internet, we will start to see divides in moral compasses shrink. This is likely due to the idea that as different cultures and societies continue to mingle with each other, they will likely converge on a general moral principle. This convergence is not a requirement of society, but instead will likely be a product of the more interconnected world.

Generally speaking, humans try to understand one another’s actions and reasoning. It is in doing so that we tend to see extraneous examples of moral relativism where the thought process is more important than the culture or the people involved. This should not be the case. Different societies have different standards that sometimes may not make sense, which is suitable should that society not hinder itself due to these guidelines. While ignoring our own bias towards other cultures, we can only then get close to understanding another. Passing judgement is a large part of human nature and can sometimes be a drastic downfall of it. As previously explained, it is not about the moral differences between cultures, but rather it is important to look at the efficacy of the society that is using their specific rules to reach prosperity.