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INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY: ETHICS

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1.

AREN'T RIGHT AND WRONG JUST MATTERS OF OPINION? ON MORAL RELATIVISM AND SUBJECTIVISM

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An Hindoo Woman throwing herself on the funeral pyre of her Husband by Frederic Shoberl. In *The World in Miniature: Hindoostan* via Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain.

Her recently deceased husband lay on the funeral pyre waiting to be lit. Hundreds of people from the nearby villages stood watching and waiting for the widow to carry out her duty of chastity to its culmination. As the pyre was lit, the woman took several steps toward it and crawled on top of her husband's corpse to embrace his neck. The pain was excruciating, but if she dismounted then she would shame her family and probably be lynched by a mob, anyway. So she lay there.

The practice of burning a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, known as suttee or sati, was commonplace in parts of India until the nineteenth century. To allow the dead man's possessions and property to pass back into the hands of his family, his widow was expected to commit suicide and fulfill her duty of chastity by immolating herself on his funeral pyre. Several cases of widows being drowned or buried alive with their dead husbands have also been recorded. This practice lasted for 2,000 years until the British outlawed it in 1829 on the grounds that it was inhumane and immoral (see Sharma 1988, 6-7).

Is suttee morally acceptable simply because it was practiced and endorsed by a culture? Are the British officials who outlawed suttee morally praiseworthy for imposing an outside standard on the native inhabitants of India and disrupting their ability to fulfill sacred social expectations? Is there a right answer to the question of whether or not suttee is morally acceptable?

This chapter deals with an important question in metaethics. Metaethics is the branch of ethics that

deals with the nature of morality. It tries to answer the questions: What is morality? Is morality objective? Where does it come from? What is the relationship between moral facts, if they exist, and this physical world that we interact with? And so, before we figure out how we ought to be and live, we must first establish whether there even is such a thing as the way we *ought* to be and live in the first place. One of the most important questions in metaethics is whether there is a moral reality that obligates us regardless of our judgments, opinions, and beliefs and whether there are moral facts that are necessarily and universally true. Perhaps ethical codes are merely relative to groups of people. Perhaps there is no true and binding objective morality outside of culture, time period, and personal preferences. Is morality objective and universal? Or is it merely a matter of opinion and tradition?

REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM

Think of a time when you disagreed with someone about the right thing to do. Maybe it was a friend, family member, celebrity, author, or political figure. You may have felt very strongly that X is obviously the right thing to do, the better course of action, or merely the lesser of two evils. The person you were disagreeing with might have felt similarly, and perhaps provided reasons for her position as well. Both of you made claims about morality. You each believed that your own position was correct or true. But are these claims about morality true or false in the same way that historical and mathematical facts are true or false?

“George Washington was the thirteenth president of the United States of America” is a false historical claim because George Washington was not the thirteenth president of the United States of America. Why is this historical claim false? Because it goes against reality. Similarly, the question before us now is whether there is such a reality for morals. Are there moral facts that hold true regardless of what we think about them? Are there moral facts that are true in virtue of some mind-independent moral reality? Those who say yes fall into the moral realism camp. And those who say no fall into the moral anti-realism camp.

Moral realism is the position that there are mind-independent facts about ethics that are true and binding even if we have beliefs to the contrary. For example, the moral realist would say that it is objectively wrong to rape, even if the vast majority of people and cultures believed otherwise—the truth of “rape is wrong” holds irrespective of our opinions and judgments about rape. Realists disagree about what grounds or what constitutes the truth of these moral facts, i.e. divine commands, a set of necessary facts, the nature of sentient creatures, etc. Nonetheless, realists maintain that these moral facts exist independently of our opinions and judgments.

Moral anti-realism is simply the negation of this thesis. For the anti-realist, there are no mind-independent facts about morality; morality can be constructed or is merely relative to culture. This latter version of anti-realism is the position called moral relativism and is the subject of this chapter.

Moral relativism, broadly construed, is the view that ethical codes are relative to the standpoints of the peoples who embrace them. This can mean many things, which will be discussed below, but relativists typically hold that ethical truths are relative to culture, that no culture's ethical code is superior to another's, and that we ought not judge other ethical codes as inferior to our own. This position falls under the category of anti-realism because it denies that moral facts exist independently of us and argues instead that morality is simply a product of people and cultures.

DESCRIPTIVE RELATIVISM

The mildest and least controversial form of relativism is descriptive relativism. According to descriptive relativism, moralities and ethical codes are radically different across cultures—and we can observe this. For example, some cultures see homosexuality as immoral while others do not; some cultures think that polygamy is morally acceptable (and should even be encouraged) while others see monogamy as the moral ideal; some cultures practice slavery while others find slavery morally abhorrent, etc. This ethical diversity is not only observed and documented now by cultural anthropologists, but even ancient writers like Herodotus and some ancient Greek skeptics recognized the different ways that cultures conducted marriage, burials, military discipline, and social participation. Those who adhere merely to descriptive relativism maintain the view that moral rules are observably dissimilar across cultures. For some relativists, this suggests the falsity of moral objectivity and is used as evidence in favor of stronger versions of relativism. Not all relativists argue that descriptive relativism is evidence against moral objectivity, but relativism often starts out from the truth of descriptive relativism and makes stronger claims about moral relativity on this basis. In other words, the observation of differing moral codes across cultures does not necessarily mean that morality is relative, but some relativists use this anthropological fact as evidence for the stronger conclusions about relativism that we will look at below.

METAETHICAL RELATIVISM

The ancient writer Herodotus famously said, “Culture is king” based on his observations of disparate cultural moralities (Histories 3.38.4)^[1]. Upon observing radical differences in the ways that different cultures practiced religion, burial, household organization, and even eating preferences he concluded that no standard exists beyond a culture to prescribe good and bad behavior. Thus, culture is king.

Unlike descriptive relativism, metaethical relativism makes this kind of stronger claim about the nature of moral truth. Metaethical relativism says that moral truths are actually only true relative to specific groups of people. This means that whether a moral belief is true is dependent on, or *relative to*, the standpoint of the person or culture that has the belief. Someone in Singapore and someone in England can both say “It is sunny outside,” but it is possible that the claim is only true for one of

them. In a similar way, metaethical relativism is the position that ethical statements are only true relative to the context that they are spoken. In other words, when someone claims that some practice, X, is moral, then the claim is true if her culture believes and lives as if X is moral. For example, if a culture holds the view that having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral, then for that culture, it is true that having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral. And for the culture that believes it is morally acceptable to have pre-marital sexual relations, then “having pre-marital sexual relations is immoral” is false.

Notice that this is different from saying, “Lying might be morally permissible in certain situations such as when a murderous ax-man asks you where your family is hiding.” Metaethical relativism is not about this kind of situation-specific method of determining what is moral. Rather it says that moral beliefs and claims are true or false relative to the cultures or standpoints in which they exist.

NORMATIVE RELATIVISM

Finally, we will look at the strongest kind of relativism: normative relativism. It is the strongest kind of relativism because it goes beyond descriptive and metaethical relativism and makes an even grander claim. According to normative relativism, no person or culture ought to judge the ethical codes of other cultures as being inferior, nor should any culture intervene in another culture to prevent it from carrying out the specifics of its ethical code. The normative relativist says that we might prefer the specific morality of our culture and even be able to offer reasons for doing so, but this does not imply that ours is superior to that of others. Normative relativists argue that because no objective, independent standpoint from which to evaluate ethical codes exists, no culture can justifiably say that its morality is objectively superior.

On the face of it, this might strike us as problematic for a couple of reasons. Perhaps this principle of normative relativism *itself* is only specific to our culture and does not necessarily apply to all cultures. In other words, just because my culture accepts normative relativism this does not entail that all cultures must abide by the same principle (of normative relativism) and not consider their moralities superior. However, if the normative relativist insists that this principle is true for all cultures (that no culture should judge the moralities of other cultures or consider its morality superior), then this seems like an admission of a universal value that is true across all cultures irrespective of whether or not they believe it to be true. Remember that one of the reasons for which relativists deny moral objectivity is the implausibility of the existence of universal values and moral facts that we can come to know. And yet, if the normative relativist believes that no culture should criticize the morality of another culture (and that this principle holds true for all cultures), then this is exactly the kind of universal moral fact that the relativist denies.

THE PROBLEM OF MORAL DIVERSITY

As we saw in the section on descriptive relativism, the problem of moral diversity is often used as evidence in defense of relativism. Relativism seems to offer a better explanation of why there exists so much moral disagreement in the world. The moral disagreements also tend to be more profoundly observed *between* cultures rather than *within* cultures. For example, the relativist might point out that cultures disagree about the morality of homosexuality—homosexual practice is outlawed in a few countries and is even punishable by death in some (Bearak and Cameron 2016). Perhaps a clearer example is that of birth control. While some countries have made artificial birth control illegal, 92% of Americans think that birth control is morally acceptable and most Western nations have legalized most birth control methods (Gallup 2019; Kirk, et al. 2013). This seems to be a point in favor of relativism, for if morality is relative to cultures, then we would expect moral disagreements to be most evident and profound when comparing the ethical codes of different cultures. The more different the cultures, the more different the ethical codes.

The moral realist who holds that there are objective truths about values has two possible responses available to the problem of moral disagreement. The first response is to question the scope and profundity of the moral disagreement between cultures. Some realists argue that the differences between moralities in cultures are more due to differences in knowledge about the world than to actual moral disagreement. For example, imagine a culture that practices senicide—the authorized killing of the elderly. When an individual in the group reaches fifty years of age, they are expected to undergo a ceremonial honor killing. On the surface, this practice seems to clash with the moral sensibilities and intuitions of people who don't engage in this practice.

But suppose one learns some new information, that this group practices senicide because of its particular views about the afterlife. They believe that one lives on in the afterlife with the same body that one died with. In order to build huts, find food, and raise a family in the afterlife, then, one must not have died at such an old age as to prevent one's body from being useful for these things. For this reason, the group members ensure that their elderly will be able to successfully overcome the challenges of the afterlife by ending their lives before their bodies become decrepit.

Now, their practice of senicide is undergirded by the values of care and compassion for the elderly. Most people might be horrified by such a practice, but the disagreement here is not one of values and morals but of facts about the world. Those who are horrified may not think that the elderly live on in the afterlife with the same bodies they died with. If they did, they might not find this practice so objectionable. The objectivist could thus argue that a lot of the supposedly moral differences we observe between cultures are more like this case where the disagreement concerns non-moral facts rather than moral facts.

The objectivist's second response is to question the main assumption made by the relativist when arguing from the problem of moral diversity. The relativist's argument against moral objectivity comes in two steps: first, she assumes that if there were an objective morality, then there would not be such moral diversity and second, she then rejects moral objectivity because of the presence of

moral diversity. But why should we grant this first assumption? Why should we assume that if morality is objective people will not disagree?

Suppose that I give my students a quadratic equation to solve and they all come up with different answers. Does the presence of many answers entail that there is no right answer? Of course not. In mathematics there is often a correct answer to a problem regardless of whether or not we have it figured out. If morality works like math in this way, then that might show us that the correct moral answers are difficult to arrive at, but it certainly does not show that there is no right answer. The relativist's assumption that there would be no moral diversity if moral objectivity were true is demonstrably false.

OBJECTIONS TO RELATIVISM

Relative to Whom?

One of the difficulties with moral relativism in general is answering the question of what a culture is or what counts as an appropriate body of people for morality to be relative to or dependent on. Is a village a large enough population to have its own valid, ethical code? Or is morality only relative to national governments and the laws set by them? Perhaps moral subjectivism is the correct form of relativism, and morality comes down to the judgments of individuals with each individual subject being enough to form a moral community with an ethical code.

This is a serious problem for relativism because the concept of a culture is so vague and ill-defined that it becomes almost useless for ethical discussions. Consider the example of the early, abolitionist movement in the United States prior to the abolishment of slavery: Was it wrong for a group of people in America to hold anti-slavery views given that the majority of the country was pro-slavery and the laws reflected such beliefs? Is it wrong for minority groups in other nations to hold views contrary to popular opinion and written law? If metaethical relativism is true, then a moral claim is true if it accords with the moral view of the culture and false if it is not. This would mean that the abolitionists held a false moral view because it diverged from the view of the wider culture.

Perhaps the relativist can respond that the abolitionist movement was large enough to count as a culture, and is therefore a legitimate moral position even though it differed from the majority view in that country. But this merely pushes the question back one step further: If the abolitionists numbered only one hundred members, would this be enough to comprise a culture? What if there were only twenty? Where if there were only two? One? On what basis does the relativist define "culture" to make it significant for ethical discussion?

Some Things Just Seem Wrong

The most common responses to relativism come in the form of what is called a *reductio ad absurdum*—a form of argument meant to disprove a view by showing us the difficult or absurd (hence the name) conclusions that the view being responded to would lead to. If the consequences are sufficiently counterintuitive or ridiculous, then we are justified in rejecting the view as being false. For example, if I argued that every person ought to be a full-time physician you could respond that if everyone were a full-time physician, then there would be no full-time politicians, firefighters, police officers, teachers, humanitarian workers, builders, artists, etc. We cannot have a functioning society if my position were true. We need more than just full-time physicians to have a coherent society. Thus, my position leads to absurd consequences, and is certainly false! This next section will first look at three major problems that relativism faces.

If relativism is true, then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that some obviously wrong behaviors are actually morally acceptable simply because some cultures practice them. Most people today think that it is really morally wrong to burn widows on funeral pyres even though it was practiced by a large group of people at one point. The relativist's position, however, commits her to conceding that even practices like suttee, female genital mutilation, infanticide, and slavery are morally acceptable to the cultures that do not see them as immoral. And because the relativist denies that there are objective morals or values that hold universally, then there is no independent standard by which to evaluate behaviors and ethical codes.

Some relativists, like David Wong (2009), see the force of this problem and try to circumvent it by conceding that some moralities are superior because they better meet the needs of people that are consistent across all cultures. However, this attempt to rescue relativism seems to undermine relativism itself! By acknowledging that certain moralities are superior because they do a better job of helping humans flourish, the relativist has conceded that there exists at least one moral fact that is true independent of culture or standpoint, namely that human flourishing and well-being are good and we should aim to maximize them.

If the relativist thinks that this fact is true regardless of what anybody believes about it, and if the cultures whose moralities better enable human flourishing and well-being are superior to the moralities or cultures that impede human flourishing and well-being, then this admission deflates the relativist position. Acknowledging that some moralities are objectively better than others presumes that there exists some independent standard or set of facts by which we can judge moralities and ethical codes. Once the admission of some independent condition(s) is entertained then it seems that we are no longer thinking relativistically but objectively.

Relativism and Tolerance

This last point ties in with another argument put forward in favor of relativism, namely that it promotes tolerance. Admirably, the relativist wants us to approach the subject of ethics with humility

and not rush to condemning behaviors that are different from ours as immoral. The idea is that if we acknowledge that no one culture's ethical code is superior to another, then our ability to practice tolerance naturally increases, for all moralities are equal. Relativism, it is argued, makes moral superiority unjustified.

However noble this might seem, it faces the same problem we previously discussed: If all moralities are equal, then why should we think that tolerance is a universal value? If relativism is true, then no ethical codes are superior, so why should we think an ethical code that promotes tolerance is better than the ethical code that ignores tolerance? By arguing that we should prefer relativism on the grounds that it better helps us promote and justify tolerance, then the relativist has conceded the existence of at least one universal value that all moralities can be judged by, namely tolerance. The presence of this universal value—this objective fact about the way we ought to live and behave—undercuts relativism, itself, for it concedes that there is at least one value that is not relative.

Moreover, tolerance is often an appropriate reaction to interacting with positions, beliefs, and behaviors that are different from our own. But are not some behaviors and moral viewpoints not worthy of tolerance? Surely it is appropriate to be intolerant of child abuse, indoctrination, slavery, senseless violence, oppression of the vulnerable, etc. While tolerance is obviously appropriate and even necessary in some situations, intolerance, and even indignation and moral outrage, are certainly appropriate and justified in the face of evil.

No Room for Social Reform and Progress

One of the strongest objections to relativism is the idea that if relativism is true, then there can be no such thing as social reform or moral progress. If each culture's ethical code is equally good and right, then when a country changes its ethical code from being pro-slavery to being anti-slavery this moral change is merely a change rather an improvement. Moral improvement and progress require that there be some standard toward which a society or an ethical code are approaching; they also entail that the subsequent morality is better than the prior morality, but again this is not something that can be said if relativism is true.

When the United States abolished slavery and segregation, and gave women and minorities the right to vote, its ethical code underwent a change. But to say that it underwent an improvement requires saying that enslaving African Americans, segregating Whites from Blacks, and preventing women and minorities from voting are objectively worse, morally speaking, than their opposites. Relativism cannot consistently support such a position for relativism entails precisely the opposite, namely that there are no objective standards for morality and morality is relative to communities. If a community decides that it wants to endorse X and then later decides to morally condemn X, then both moralities are equal. No morality is superior to another.

However, this seems like another bullet to bite. Relativism implies that certain instances of obvious

moral improvement are merely instances of moral change rather than moral progress. William Wilberforce's work to end the slave trade in the British Empire, Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, and eventual martyrdom, dedicated to advocating equality and eliminating racism, and the countless other moral exemplars who were able to see past culture, law, and accepted custom to recognize moral truths that get buried or obfuscated over time really did help bring about moral progress. To say otherwise seems strongly counterintuitive.

CONCLUSION

Much of the relativism espoused by ordinary people admirably has its roots in the virtues of tolerance for opposing views and humility about one's own positions, and in that respect, it can be applauded. However, this kind of relativism is often endorsed without the appropriate level of critical evaluation that inevitably shows the inconsistency, unlivability, and even the immoral consequences of relativism. Such consequences include:

- Moral progress is impossible.
- Certain obviously immoral behaviors like slavery and oppression of women and minorities are morally acceptable simply because they enjoy acceptance by a culture.

It's for these reasons, among others, that according to a 2009 survey only 27.7% of professional philosophers are anti-realists with only a fraction of those endorsing relativism about ethics (Bourget and Chalmers 2014, 34). Relativism clashes with much of what seems to be fundamental to the human experience. We cringe when we recall the atrocities of American slavery, the Holocaust, and the Rape of Nanking. We see the wrongness of these atrocities like we see the rightness of $2 + 2 = 4$. Relativism suffers from several major problems and this should make us question its ability to explain the nature of morality.

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1. See Herodotus, *The Histories*, in *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Geoffrey R. Crane, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0016.tlg001.perseus-grc1:3.38.4> ↵

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