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Drefcinski and Relativism

Moral and descriptive relativism, though they sound similar, are two distinctly separate ideas. As Drefcinski explores in his essay, *The Superficial Sophistication of Moral Relativism*, their relationship, and more specifically the manner in which moral relativists link them to argue their case, is weak.

Descriptive relativism is the concept that different cultures, people, or distinct groups will develop different moral outlooks, and therefore produce different answers to moral questions. Moral relativism is the belief that what is actually morally correct is relative to different cultures, groups or individuals. It therefore argues that there is no objective moral truth, and all perspectives on morality are equally true or valuable. The difference here is clear – descriptive relativism is an observation, an ‘empirical thesis about cultural diversity’ as Drefcinski says (157) which makes no attempt to answer the philosophical question of what morality is correct. Moral relativism, on the other hand, is a ‘normative’ statement that attempts to directly answer the previously posed question. Descriptive relativism is a thesis, or a claim of a natural fact, moral relativism is an assertion of opinion on a philosophical question.

The link between these two ideas that I will explore in this essay is an argument posed by moral relativists – the Argument from Disagreement. It asserts that “...because different cultures and individuals hold different moral beliefs and standards, there is no objective truth to any of

those moral beliefs and standards.” (159). In short, it claims that because descriptive relativism is true, moral relativism must follow from it. A formal version of the argument is as such:

1. If Descriptive Relativism is true, then Moral Relativism is true.
2. Descriptive Relativism is true.
3. Therefore, Moral Relativism is true.

Taken as written from the Drefcinski notes.

As an attempt to prove moral relativism, this looks good. The argument is certainly valid, as the conclusion directly follows the two premises. Whether or not it is a sound argument – meaning it is both valid and the premises are true – is something we need to look a little closer for.

We’ll start with the second premise. While descriptive relativism is a convincing concept, it has some issues. The first of which is what Drefcinski calls the ‘demarcation of cultures’, in which we don’t have a foolproof way of measuring where one culture ends and another begins. For one example, the United States is frequently seen as a single culture, but it has hundreds of subcultures that have distinct views. Specific regions of the USA bleed into one another as well – Minnesota and Wisconsin are very different places with many different values, but they’re both ‘midwestern’ states. You can subdivide these ‘cultures’ in this way all the way down to the individual. This can be reframed as another issue – the reason for these subdivisions is because even within the smallest possible ‘society’ or ‘culture’, people may disagree on moral questions. In addition to this, individuals often belong to several groups at once, groups which may not agree on all values. These factors diminish descriptive relativism by somewhat eliminating the ‘different societies’ portion – the only demarcation we can use is between individuals, as there is no true consistency across any large collective of people.

The more fundamental issue with the argument from disagreement is with the first premise. The idea that different people or groups produce different answers to the same question implies nothing about the objective truth of those answers. Connecting the two together is useless, as it provides neither evidence nor argument for what makes the beliefs correct, it just posits that they are correct simply because they exist. If we accept this, logic and debate become ultimately pointless, and we undermine the existence of philosophy in general.

Due to the instability of premise II and the pure inaccuracy of premise I, this argument is not sound. As such, it fails to prove moral relativism in any capacity. This does not outright invalidate moral relativism, but it shows several of the idea's deepest flaws. In the case of the argument from disagreement, moral relativism remains an unconvincing philosophical notion.