Philosophy Now
a magazine of ideas

Philosophy Now – Issue 82
https://philosophynow.org/issues/82/Morality_is_a_Culturally_Conditioned_Response

Morality is a Culturally Conditioned Response

Jesse Prinz argues that the source of our moral inclinations is merely cultural.

Suppose you have a moral disagreement with someone, for example, a disagreement about whether it is okay to live in a society where the amount of money you are born with is the primary determinant of how wealthy you will end up. In pursuing this debate, you assume that you are correct about the issue and that your conversation partner is mistaken. You conversation partner assumes that you are making the blunder. In other words, you both assume that only one of you can be correct. *Relativists* reject this assumption. They believe that conflicting moral beliefs can both be true. The stanch socialist and righteous royalist are equally right; they just occupy different moral worldviews.

Relativism has been widely criticized. It is attacked as being sophomoric, pernicious, and even incoherent. Moral philosophers, theologians, and social scientists try to identify objective values so as to forestall the relativist menace. I think these efforts have failed. Moral relativism is a plausible doctrine, and it has important implications for how we conduct our lives, organize our societies, and deal with others.

Cannibals and Child Brides

Morals vary dramatically across time and place. One group's good can be another group's evil. Consider cannibalism, which has been practiced by groups in every part of the world. Anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday found evidence for cannibalism in 34% of cultures in one cross-historical sample. Or consider blood sports, such as those practiced in Roman amphitheaters, in which thousands of excited fans watched as human beings engaged in mortal combat. Killing for pleasure has also been documented among headhunting cultures, in which decapitation was sometimes pursued as a recreational activity. Many societies have also practiced extreme forms of public torture and execution, as was the case in Europe before the 18th century. And there are cultures that engage in painful forms of body modification, such as scarification, genital infibulation, or footbinding – a practice that lasted in China for 1,000 years and involved the deliberate and excruciating crippling of young girls. Variation in attitudes towards violence is paralleled by variation in attitudes towards sex and marriage. When studying culturally independent societies, anthropologists have found that over 80% permit polygamy. Arranged marriage is also common, and some cultures marry off girls while they are still pubescent or even younger. In parts of Ethiopia, half the girls are married before their 15th birthday.

Of course, there are also cross-cultural similarities in morals. No group would last very long if it promoted gratuitous attacks on neighbors or discouraged childrearing. But within these broad constraints, almost anything is possible. Some groups prohibit attacks on the hut next door, but encourage attacks on the village next door. Some groups encourage parents to commit selective infanticide, to use corporal punishment on children, or force them into physical labor or sexual slavery.

Such variation cries out for explanation. If morality were objective, shouldn't we see greater consensus? Objectivists reply in two different ways:

Deny variation. Some objectivists say moral variation is greatly exaggerated – people really agree about values but have different factual beliefs or life circumstances that lead them to behave differently. For example, slave

owners may have believed that their slaves were intellectually inferior, and Inuits who practiced infanticide may have been forced to do so because of resource scarcity in the tundra. But it is spectacularly implausible that all moral differences can be explained this way. For one thing, the alleged differences in factual beliefs and life circumstances rarely justify the behaviors in question. Would the inferiority of one group really justify enslaving them? If so, why don't we think it's acceptable to enslave people with low IQs? Would life in the tundra justify infanticide? If so, why don't we just kill off destitute children around the globe instead of giving donations to Oxfam? Differences in circumstances do not show that people share values; rather they help to explain why values end up being so different.

Deny that variation matters. Objectivists who concede that moral variation exists argue that variation does not entail relativism; after all, scientific theories differ too, and we don't assume that every theory is true. This analogy fails. Scientific theory variation can be explained by inadequate observations or poor instruments; improvements in each lead towards convergence. When scientific errors are identified, corrections are made. By contrast, morals do not track differences in observation, and there also is no evidence for rational convergence as a result of moral conflicts. Western slavery didn't end because of new scientific observations; rather it ended with the industrial revolution, which ushered in a wage-based economy. Indeed, slavery became more prevalent *after* the Enlightenment, when science improved. Even with our modern understanding of racial equality, Benjamin Skinner has shown that there are more people living in *de facto* slavery worldwide today than during the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. When societies converge morally, it's usually because one has dominated the other (as with the missionary campaigns to end cannibalism). With morals, unlike science, there is no well-recognized standard that can be used to test, confirm, or correct when disagreements arise.

Objectivists might reply that progress has clearly been made. Aren't our values better than those of the 'primitive' societies that practice slavery, cannibalism, and polygamy? Here we are in danger of smugly supposing superiority. Each culture assumes it is in possession of the moral truth. From an outside perspective, our progress might be seen as a regress. Consider factory farming, environmental devastation, weapons of mass destruction, capitalistic exploitation, coercive globalization, urban ghettoization, and the practice of sending elderly relatives to nursing homes. Our way of life might look grotesque to many who have come before and many who will come after.

Emotions and Inculcation

Moral variation is best explained by assuming that morality, unlike science, is not based on reason or observation. What, then, is morality based on? To answer this, we need to consider how morals are learned.

Children begin to learn values when they are very young, before they can reason effectively. Young children behave in ways that we would never accept in adults: they scream, throw food, take off their clothes in public, hit, scratch, bite, and generally make a ruckus. Moral education begins from the start, as parents correct these antisocial behaviors, and they usually do so by conditioning children's emotions. Parents threaten physical punishment ("Do you want a spanking?"), they withdraw love ("I'm not going to play with you any more!"), ostracize ("Go to your room!"), deprive ("No dessert for you!"), and induce vicarious distress ("Look at the pain you've caused!"). Each of these methods causes the misbehaved child to experience a negative emotion and associate it with the punished behavior. Children also learn by emotional osmosis. They see their parents' reactions to news broadcasts and storybooks. They hear hours of judgmental gossip about inconsiderate neighbors, unethical coworkers, disloyal friends, and the black sheep in the family. Consummate imitators, children internalize the feelings expressed by their parents, and, when they are a bit older, their peers.

Emotional conditioning and osmosis are not merely convenient tools for acquiring values: they are essential. Parents sometimes try to reason with their children, but moral reasoning only works by drawing attention to values that the child has already internalized through emotional conditioning. No amount of reasoning can engender a moral value, because all values are, at bottom, emotional attitudes.

Recent research in psychology supports this conjecture. It seems that we decide whether something is wrong by introspecting our feelings: if an action makes us feel bad, we conclude that it is wrong. Consistent with this,

people's moral judgments can be shifted by simply altering their emotional states. For example, psychologist Simone Schnall and her colleagues found that exposure to fart spray, filth, and disgusting movies can cause people to make more severe moral judgments about unrelated phenomena.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt and colleagues have shown that people make moral judgments even when they cannot provide any justification for them. For example, 80% of the American college students in Haidt's study said it's wrong for two adult siblings to have consensual sex with each other even if they use contraception and no one is harmed. And, in a study I ran, 100% of people agreed it would be wrong to sexually fondle an infant even if the infant was not physically harmed or traumatized. Our emotions confirm that such acts are wrong even if our usual justification for that conclusion (harm to the victim) is inapplicable.

If morals are emotionally based, then people who lack strong emotions should be blind to the moral domain. This prediction is borne out by psychopaths, who, it turns out, suffer from profound emotional deficits. Psychologist James Blair has shown that psychopaths treat moral rules as mere conventions. This suggests that emotions are necessary for making moral judgments. The judgment that something is morally wrong is an emotional response.

It doesn't follow that every emotional response is a moral judgment. Morality involves specific emotions. Research suggests that the main moral emotions are anger and disgust when an action is performed by another person, and guilt and shame when an action is performed by one's self. Arguably, one doesn't harbor a moral attitude towards something unless one is disposed to have both these self- and other-directed emotions. You may be disgusted by eating cow tongue, but unless you are a moral vegetarian, you wouldn't be *ashamed* of eating it.

In some cases, the moral emotions that get conditioned in childhood can be re-conditioned later in life. Someone who feels ashamed of a homosexual desire may subsequently feel ashamed about feeling ashamed. This person can be said to have an inculcated tendency to view homosexuality as immoral, but also a conviction that homosexuality is permissible, and the latter serves to curb the former over time.

This is not to say that reasoning is irrelevant to morality. One can convince a person that homophobia is wrong by using the light of reason to draw analogies with other forms of discrimination, but this strategy can only work if the person has a negative sentiment towards bigotry. Likewise, through extensive reasoning, one might persuade someone that eating meat is wrong; but the only arguments that will work are ones that appeal to prior sentiments. It would be hopeless to argue vegetarianism with someone who does not shudder at the thought of killing an innocent, sentient being. As David Hume said, reason is always slave to the passions.

If this picture is right, we have a set of emotionally conditioned basic values, and a capacity for reasoning, which allows us to extend these values to new cases. There are two important implications. One is that some moral debates have no resolution because the two sides have different basic values. This is often the case with liberals and conservatives. Research suggests that conservatives value some things that are less important to liberals, including hierarchical authority structures, self-reliance, in-group solidarity, and sexual purity. Debates about welfare, foreign policy, and sexual values get stymied because of these fundamental differences.

The second implication is that we cannot change basic values by reason alone. Various events in adulthood might be capable of reshaping our inculcated sentiments, including trauma, brainwashing, and immersion in a new community (we have an unconscious tendency towards social conformity). Reason can however be used to convince people that their basic values are in need of revision, because reason can reveal when values are inconsistent and self-destructive. An essay on moral relativism might even convince someone to give up some basic values, on the ground that they are socially inculcated. But reason alone cannot instill new values or settle which values we should have. Reason tells us what is the case, not what ought to be.

In summary, moral judgments are based on emotions, and reasoning normally contributes only by helping us extrapolate from our basic values to novel cases. Reasoning can also lead us to discover that our basic values are culturally inculcated, and that might impel us to search for alternative values, but reason alone cannot tell us which values to adopt, nor can it instill new values.

God, Evolution, and Reason: Is There an Objective Moral Code?

The hypothesis that moral judgments are emotionally based can explain why they vary across cultures and resist transformation through reasoning, but this is not enough to prove that moral relativism is true. An argument for relativism must also show that there is no basis for morality beyond the emotions with which we have been conditioned. The relativists must provide reasons for thinking objectivist theories of morality fail.

Objectivism holds that there is one true morality binding upon all of us. To defend such a view, the objectivist must offer a theory of where morality comes from, such that it can be universal in this way. There are three main options: Morality could come from a benevolent god; it could come from human nature (for example, we could have evolved an innate set of moral values); or it could come from rational principles that all rational people must recognize, like the rules of logic and arithmetic. Much ink has been spilled defending each of these possibilities, and it would be impossible here to offer a critical review of all ethical theories. Instead, let's consider some simple reasons for pessimism.

The problem with divine commands as a cure for relativism is that there is no consensus among believers about what God or the gods want us to do. Even when there are holy scriptures containing lists of divine commands, there are disagreements about interpretation: Does "Thou shalt not kill?" cover enemies? Does it cover animals? Does it make one culpable for manslaughter and self-defense? Does it prohibit suicide? The philosophical challenge of proving that a god exists is already hard; figuring out who that god is and what values are divinely sanctioned is vastly harder.

The problem with human nature as a basis for universal morality is that it lacks normative import, that is, this doesn't itself provide us with any definitive view of good and bad. Suppose we have some innate moral values. Why should we abide by them? Non-human primates often kill, steal, and rape without getting punished by members of their troops. Perhaps our innate values promote those kinds of behaviors as well. Does it follow that we shouldn't punish them? Certainly not. If we have innate values – which is open to debate – they evolved to help us cope with life as hunter-gatherers in small competitive bands. To live in large stable societies, we are better off following the 'civilized' values we've invented.

Finally, the problem with reason, as we have seen, is that it never adds up to value. If I tell you that a wine has a balance between tannin and acid, it doesn't follow that you will find it delicious. Likewise, reason cannot tell us which facts are morally good. Reason is evaluatively neutral. At best, reason can tell us which of our values are inconsistent, and which actions will lead to fulfillment of our goals. But, given an inconsistency, reason cannot tell us which of our conflicting values to drop, and reason cannot tell us which goals to follow. If my goals come into conflict with your goals, reason tells me that I must either thwart your goals, or give up caring about mine; but reason cannot tell me to favor one choice over the other.

Many attempts have been made to rebut such concerns, but each attempt has just fueled more debate. At this stage, no defense of objectivism has swayed doubters, and given the fundamental limits mentioned here (the inscrutability of divine commands, the normative emptiness of evolution, and the moral neutrality of reason), objectivism looks unlikely.

Living With Moral Relativism

People often resist relativism because they think it has unacceptable implications. Let's conclude by considering some allegations and responses.

Allegation: *Relativism entails that anything goes.*

Response: Relativists concede that if you were to inculcate any given set of values, those values would be true for those who possessed them. But we have little incentive to inculcate values arbitrarily. If we trained our

children to be ruthless killers, they might kill us or get killed. Values that are completely self-destructive can't last.

Allegation: *Relativism entails that we have no way to criticize Hitler.*

Response: First of all, Hitler's actions were partially based on false beliefs, rather than values ('scientific' racism, moral absolutism, the likelihood of world domination). Second, the problem with Hitler was not that his values were false, but that they were *pernicious*. Relativism does not entail that we should tolerate murderous tyranny. When someone threatens us or our way of life, we are strongly motivated to protect ourselves.

Allegation: *Relativism entails that moral debates are senseless, since everyone is right.*

Response: This is a major misconception. Many people have overlapping moral values, and one can settle debates by appeal to moral common ground. We can also have substantive debates about how to apply and extend our basic values. Some debates are senseless, however. Committed liberals and conservatives rarely persuade each other, but public debates over policy can rally the base and sway the undecided.

Allegation: *Relativism doesn't allow moral progress.*

Response: In one sense this is correct; moral values do not become more true. But they can become better by other criteria. For example, some sets of values are more consistent and more conducive to social stability. If moral relativism is true, morality can be regarded as a tool, and we can think about what we'd like that tool to do for us and revise morality accordingly.

One might summarize these points by saying that relativism does not undermine the capacity to criticize others or to improve one's own values. Relativism does tell us, however, that we are mistaken when we think we are in possession of the one true morality. We can try to pursue moral values that lead to more fulfilling lives, but we must bear in mind that fulfillment is itself relative, so no single set of values can be designated universally fulfilling. The discovery that relativism is true can help each of us individually by revealing that our values are mutable and parochial. We should not assume that others share our views, and we should recognize that our views would differ had we lived in different circumstances. These discoveries may make us more tolerant and more flexible. Relativism does not entail tolerance or any other moral value, but, once we see that there is no single true morality, we lose one incentive for trying to impose our values on others.

Jesse Prinz is a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the City University of New York. His books include Gut Reactions*,* The Emotional Construction of Morals*, and* Beyond Human Nature.