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**An Argument Against Ethical Relativism**

“When corporations conduct business abroad, they are often placed in circumstances where paying bribes is widespread, common and culturally accepted. In those situations, businesses should not be prohibited from paying bribes. I have been in such circumstances. Not only do we as businesses need to make those payments to compete, who are we to evaluate the practices of our international neighbors? While paying bribes has some social costs it is not, ethically speaking, a problem to adapt to local practices and pay bribes where it is accepted and normal part of doing business.”

Is it not unethical for a corporation to engage in illegal activities when these activities are widely accepted and carried out frequently in a given society or country? Clearly, the above quote argues that businesses cannot be blamed, from an ethical perspective, for paying bribes when doing so is common practice in the country. According to this statement, businesses should not be judged when adapting to social norms or established traditions in foreign countries. Evidently, this claim is based on the principle of ethical relativism. In this short analytic essay, I am going to provide a critical response to the statement that, from an ethical point of view, businesses are not engaging in immoral activities as long as they are following the relative cultural norms. In order to do so, we will first briefly explain the idea behind ethical relativism. Once I have done so, I will outline why I believe this idea can be wrong and misleading when applied to certain social and political issues, including the practice of paying bribes.

Ethical relativism is the idea “that ethical values and judgements are ultimately dependent upon, or relative to, one’s culture or personal feelings” (DesJardins, 2009). In other words, ethical relativists assume that there is no true moral right or wrong. They believe that all differences in opinion can be traced back to certain cultural standards and the idea that no single belief is really right. This way of thinking implies that when a practice or tradition is widely accepted or normal in a given society, partaking in this activity cannot be labeled as morally wrong. Essentially, this is the argument used in order to defend the payment of bribes in countries in which doing so is common practice. For example, ethical relativists would agree that, from an ethical point of view, corporations like Walmart cannot be judged for paying Mexican government officials in order to influence their decision making for the sake of the company. According to this belief, Walmart cannot be hold accountable for playing its role in a malfunctioning system, characterized by political and social corruption.

We disagree with this point of view. We believe that the entire idea of ethical relativism is flawed because it neglects the fact that we as humans share certain principles which are common across cultures, societies and continents. By first identifying these underlying universal themes, and then applying them to a certain ethical issue, we can essentially move an argument to a point where we present more than just an opinion. When we are basing our arguments on ubiquitous human standards and principles, we can actually come to a comprehensive conclusion on many controversial ethical issues.

Of course, now the tricky question is what exactly are these universal, ethical principles? We recognize that this is not an easy question to answer. However, even though most of us will probably name a slightly different set of common moral standards, we claim that there will be certain themes which tend to reappear more often than others. For instance, ideas like *honesty*, *justice*, *equality*, *respect*, and *freedom of choice* are some of the most common principles many of us will have in mind when thinking about whether a specific issue is ethically right or wrong. Looking at Walmart’s bribe payments in Mexico, or any other corporation engaging in such activities in other highly corrupt countries, we can therefore conclude that the individuals responsible for these payments were violating numerous universal ethical principles.

Here, we will focus on the two (from our perspective) biggest ethical infringements of partaking in bribery. First, bribe payments are in contrast to the principle of justice, specifically social justice. Not only, does corruption mainly benefit the already wealthy, it is also almost impossible for poor people to influence certain decisions in their favor. In other words, bribery is unfair because it is driving the gap between rich and poor further and further apart. Second, corruption is in contradiction with the principle of honesty. Government representatives as well as corporate employees do have the obligation to avoid misleading and fraudulent behavior. Accepting or paying bribes clearly violates this principle.

Since the principles of honesty and justice are not exclusive to a certain society, or a specific culture, but universal amongst all humans, we conclude that companies like Walmart cannot justify their bribe payments by pointing to certain accepted social standards. Thus, it is not acceptable to us to defend one’s own personal wrongdoing by pointing at others who are engaging in similar activities. As stated earlier, we believe that this is the main flaw of ethical relativism. Relying on the assumption that practices are not ethically wrong as long as others are doing the same, ignores the point that we as humans share certain beliefs. Simply put, the misbehaviors of others would not justify our own personal misbehavior.

Sources:

1. DesJardins, J. R. (2009). Ch. 1: Why Study Ethics. In *An Introduction to Business Ethics* (p. 11). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
2. Boatright, J.R. and Smith, J.D. (2016). Case 14.3: Walmart’s Bribery in Mexico. In *Ethics and the Conduct of Business 8th Edition*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson