

DS760

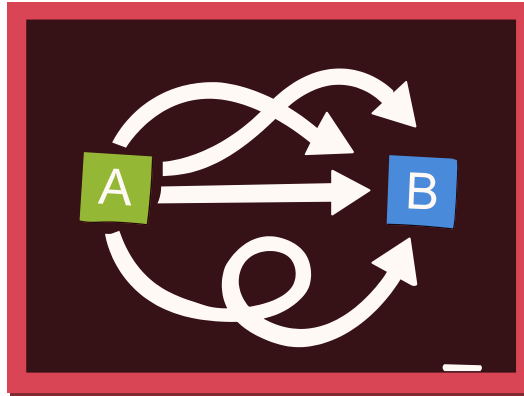
Ethics of Data Science

Philosophical Frameworks

Ethical Relativism

Design-Ethics Connection

Multiple tools, multiple perspectives



We mentioned earlier that solving ethical dilemmas is a bit like working on a design problem. So in a design problem you may have different people who come up with the different solutions, and you may find some solutions are better than others. What we'll be talking about in the philosophical frameworks section of this course are some tools that can help you work on ethical dilemmas, even if different people use different tools, they may still end up with equally good answers to how to approach the dilemma-- maybe some good solutions.



Moral Values Vary Across Cultures and Times


A lot of variation in what cultural groups consider moral and immoral.

- Example: Typical U.S. citizens vs. ISIS fundamentalists

Moral norms vary over time.

- Example: Views of slavery in US in 1800s and now

What you think is moral has a lot to do with who raised you and when and where you were raised.




So ethical relativism starts with these observations. There are a lot of variation in what cultural groups consider to be moral and immoral, and you can look in one culture and see one set of practices, and a different culture you'll see a different set of practices. For instance, you'll see this in choice of clothing, whether a woman exposes her face in public. You'll see this in the food that people eat, and also the behaviors between boys and girls. So different cultures seem to have different practices.

It also seems to be that over time the same culture can have different practices. We, in the United States, no longer view slavery as moral, but there was a period in our history where slavery was considered normal and moral. It's also the case that different people are raised differently, and what you come to believe to be moral is largely a function of how you were raised. These observations lead to this view of ethical relativism.



Ethical Relativism

- Different cultures have different moral codes.
- Therefore, no universal right and wrong.
- Right and wrong determined by the moral code of a person's culture.



Ethical relativism is defined as follows. Different cultures have different moral codes, therefore, there is no universal moral code. There is no right or wrong that applies across the board to everybody of all cultures. Rather, what's right and wrong for a given person is determined by the moral code of that person's culture.

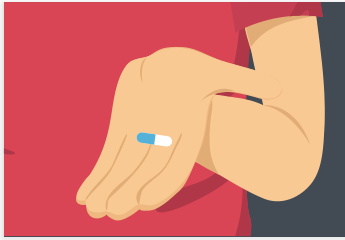
So for instance, a French woman becomes pregnant and may not think twice about getting an abortion by taking a pill. Did she do the right thing or the wrong thing? Well an ethical relativist would say, how do people in France feel about abortion. If someone gets pregnant accidentally, is it considered morally permissible to take up pill that causes her to abort a fetus? If so, then she's moral, and I think in this case most people would say the French woman was moral.

A Hindu man eats beef. Let's suppose he lives in a Hindu part of India where people don't eat beef. If people generally think that eating beef would be immoral, if he's part of that culture, then his eating beef was wrong according to ethical relativism.

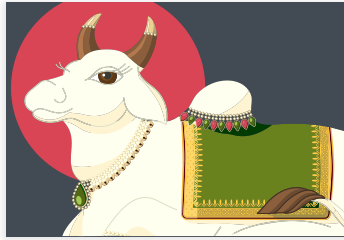
Our last example is a Chinese man who sends his 12-year-old daughter off to earn money, so that her brother could attend public school. So the 12-year-old daughter is toiling away 60 hours a week at a job, and the result is that she does not go to school but her brother now can go to school. Is the man's decision to send his 12-year-old daughter off to do this moral or immoral? Well that would depend on how the culture sees this. I hear that this is widely practiced in the rural areas of China. If so, one could argue that the culture

seems to endorse this kind of behavior, and if so, then the rural Chinese man is not immoral in doing what people of his culture do, which is sacrificing one child, so to speak, so that another one can become educated.

Examples



A French woman gets an abortion.



A Hindu man from a Hindu region of India eats beef.



A rural Chinese man sends his 12 year old daughter away to earn money so that her brother can attend public school.

Let's consider some examples. A French woman accidentally gets pregnant and decides to abort a fetus by taking a particular pill. An ethical relativist would suggest that whether that action is moral or immoral has to do with how her culture perceives it. I would dare to say that probably in France, this action would be considered moral, especially if it's a very early pregnancy.

Another example is a Hindu man who lives in a Hindu region of India, and who eat beef. Now he, himself, may see nothing wrong with this action. He may not feel as most people do about eating beef. Nonetheless, an ethical relativist would say, given that his culture would look down on this action as immoral, it is immoral. He shouldn't be eating beef. He's immoral.

Finally, consider a Chinese man who decides to send his daughter off to earn money so that her younger brother can attend public school. So while the 12-year-old daughter is off toiling away 60 hours a week at a difficult job, the brother is going to school. Is this action moral? Should the man be allowed to be sending his daughter off this way? Well, the answer from the point of view of an ethical relativist lies in what's considered acceptable by his culture. In rural China, I understand that this is considered a fairly normal thing to do, and so probably his culture would not look down on the action as immoral, in which case the Chinese man is behaving perfectly morally.

Question 1

DS760 - Philosophical Frameworks - Ethical Relativism

🔊 Question for Self Assessment: Short Answer

What would an Ethical Relativist (also called a Cultural Relativist) say about the treatment of women under sharia law in certain Muslim countries?

SUBMIT

Answer is at the end of this transcript

So ethical relativism then is of a view about morality that says what is moral is determined by a person's culture. It's not that there is no such thing as right and wrong, but rather right and wrong is relative to one's culture. What I'd like you to do now is to think about how an ethical relativist would evaluate the treatment of women under Sharia law. So what would an ethical relativist say about perhaps denying women education, keeping them at home, and having very harsh punishments for actions, such as exposing their face in public? I'd like you to answer below. And then after you're done, click on the site and read what Maryam Namazie has to say.

Analyzing Ethical Relativism

If ethical relativism is correct, various claims follow by logic that are difficult to accept:

- Nazis were moral to exterminate Jews during WW2.
- What the cultural majority thinks is moral defines what is moral for everyone; whether an act is moral is just a matter of what the majority believes.
- A culture never progresses morally; it just changes. Example: changing attitudes on U.S. slavery.
- We cannot say we are more/less moral than another country.

So if ethical relativism is correct, various things followed by logic. For instance, if all morality is measured according to cultural standards, then the Nazis might be seen as moral to behave toward the Jews as they did during World War II. You can think of the Nazis as part of a Nazi culture that condoned the behavior, their behavior, during World War II. Most people find that hard to accept, and so they reject ethical relativism.

What you can't do is say the Nazis were immoral, but ethical relativism is a good theory. That would be to hold an incoherent view. Let's look at another logical problem with the theory.

According to ethical relativism, what the majority of the culture thinks basically defines right and wrong for the culture. But a problem with that is when the majority is fickle, and may all move in one direction one year, and another direction another year. You could imagine how that might happen, say, with respect to abortion after a highly moving movie against abortion, for instance. But is right and wrong something that changes so easily as to become immoral one year, and moral the next year based on a movie?

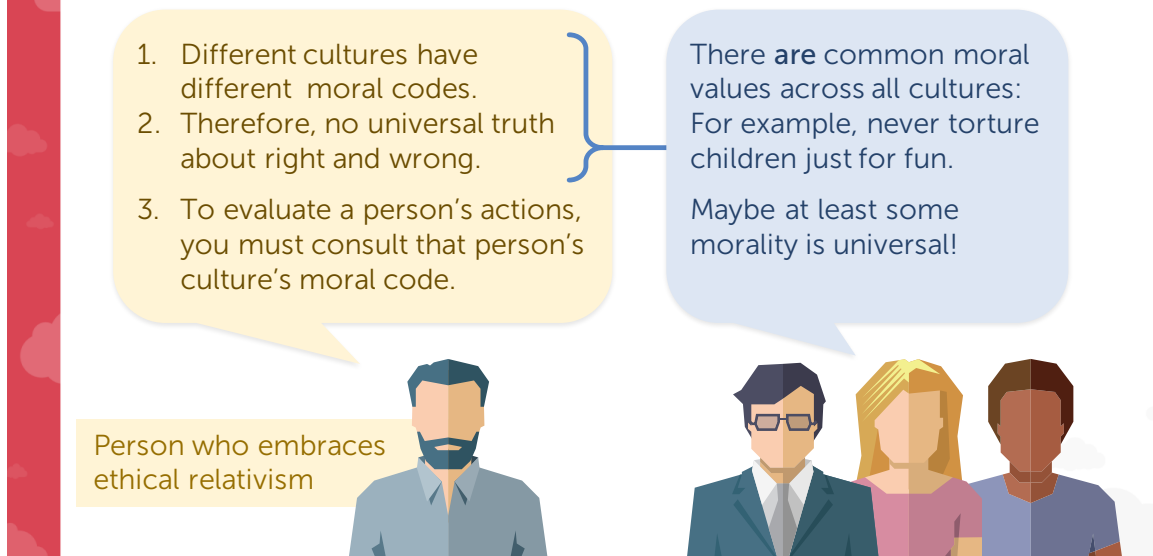
Another issue with ethical relativism is that you can't ever progress morally as a culture. Progress means to get better, to improve. All that can happen is that you change. So for instance, we like to think that in the United States we've become more moral with respect to slavery. We no longer allow it. We used to not merely allow it, but think it was fine.

And yet this theory we'll have to say that well slavery was moral relativist to the culture of that time, but immoral relative to our culture today. Slavery was never wrong.

Finally if we accept ethical relativism, we have this issue, that we can't look at another country and say we're more moral than they are, even with respect to a particular action. For instance we can't say we are more moral in our treatment of women than the countries that practice Sharia. And in fact, I think they would argue that they were more moral in their treatment of women than modern Western cultures are, but neither of those two claims can be made according to ethical relativism.

According to ethical relativism, our actions are judged by our culture. Their actions are judged by their culture. And since there is no universal moral standard, we can't measure our culture against another culture and use that standard. We're just both equally moral, if you like.

Universal Value Critique of Ethical Relativism



A person who embraces ethical relativism basically reasons like this. Look, different cultures have different moral code. We can see this just by observing. Therefore, it's obvious that there is no universal moral code. There's no universal truth about right and wrong. Therefore, if we're going to evaluate a person's actions, we have to consult that person's culture's moral code. A person will be moral if he acts according to the moral code of his culture.

So the final criticism I'd like to offer against ethical relativism is that maybe there really are some universal moral values. Maybe one and two are wrong. For instance, have you ever encountered a culture where torturing children just for fun was considered acceptable? Have you ever encountered a culture that did not honor its dead in some way or other?

It seems as though there really are some universal moral values-- values shared across all cultures. And if this is the case, then ethical relativism is false. One of its major assumptions is wrong. It's not the case that different cultures, by definition, have different moral codes. They may have some differences, on the other hand, there may be some moral truths that are shared between cultures.

And so there is at least the possibility that right and wrong is at least in part due to something beyond the culture. It's due to something bigger than mere culture. And different theoretical frameworks that we will talk about later will try to capture that bigger aspect to right and wrong in different ways. For now, we'll just say that ethical relativism maybe is flawed in its very preliminary assumption that all cultures define right and wrong differently.

Conclusion

Ethical Relativism is appealing in some ways: it reminds us that cultures differ in their moral perspectives and that our own perspective should not be assumed to be superior.

But as a moral theory, it has serious logical problems.

Therefore, most philosophers, including Deborah Johnson, say we should be wary of using Ethical Relativism as a theoretical framework for evaluating ethical issues.


So in conclusion, while ethical relativism is appealing in some ways, it's not all that tenable according to most philosophers. So what ways is ethical relativism appealing? Well we like the idea that our culture doesn't call all the shots, that different cultures have different perspectives, and our culture has but one perspective on right and wrong, on anything for that matter.

The problem, however, with ethical relativism is that it says more than that. It doesn't merely say that there are different perspectives on right and wrong, but it goes a step further and says, therefore, right and wrong is defined by that culture's perspective, and this is where the logical problems come in. As a moral theory, these logical consequences are untenable.

So most philosophers-- including Deborah Johnson, who is the author of one of your textbooks-- conclude that we should probably be wary of using ethical relativism as a tool for evaluating moral dilemmas. Instead, we should look to some other theoretical frameworks.

Question 1 Answer

DS760 - Philosophical Frameworks - Ethical Relativism

 Feedback for Self Assessment

What would an Ethical Relativist (also called a Cultural Relativist) say about the treatment of women under sharia law in certain Muslim countries?

Your answer:

Feedback:

See Maryam Namazie's response: [Racism, Cultural Relativism and Women's Rights](#).