Synopsis In this chapter we define and discuss various forms of ethical relativism. We consider reasons for thinking that relativism is true and reasons for thinking that it is false. In the end it seems that the arguments against relativism are much stronger than the arguments in its favor. Introduction

Have you ever had anyone tell you, “Well, that may be right for you, but it’s not right for me”? It could be that the view underlying this statement is **ethical relativism**. Ethical relativisms come in various forms, but the common thread that binds them together is the idea that what is actually right and wrong can vary from one person or group of people to another. While this has never been the dominant view in the West, it gained ground throughout the 20th century and with the entrance of Postmodernism into public consciousness it has become a major factor in Western culture. If ethical relativism is true, then the approach that we must take to determining what is morally right will be very different from the approach that we would take if relativism is not true. Hence it is very important to treat this issue near the beginning of a book on metaethics. One type of relativism is essentially epistemological in nature. It argues that moral judgements are completely subjective; that is, it holds that there is no possible way to be objective about morality. This view is called **“moral subjectivism.”**10 It may at first seem strange to the reader

10 The opposite of moral subjectivism is **ethical objectivism**, which holds that ethical principles are not completely subjective but rather can be known objectively.

who has never encountered it, but it’s not so odd: after all, we have no problem saying that what kind of food tastes best, what kind of music sounds best, and what kind of painting looks best are completely subjective issues. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” as they say. Essentially the moral subjectivist is saying that morality is also a matter of personal taste or preference. One person prefers a society in which taxes are high in order to provide social benefits for even the neediest people in that society, while another person prefers a society in which both taxes and social benefits are minimal in the belief that this will result in a thrifty and industrious working class. Obviously there are advantages and disadvantages to both of these approaches; perhaps which is best is simply a matter of taste. That is what the subjectivist would argue, anyway.

Another type of relativism is “cultural relativism.” This is the view that what is right or wrong is determined by your culture, by the society in which you live. The culture of the United States values independence, self- reliance, resourcefulness, and the Protestant work ethic (among other things). A cultural relativist would say that what is right in our context is what is in accord with these values. Therefore a socio-economic approach that tends to be in opposition to high taxes and broad social benefits is the more ethical option in the US. In contrast, Chinese culture (even prior to the ascent of Chinese communism) values the whole above the parts, seeing humanity as an ascending hierarchy the preservation and flourishing of which is the greatest good. Hence the family unit is of more importance than the individuals who make up the family, the village is of more importance than the families that make up the village, and the state is of more importance than the villages that make up the state. But that which benefits the state tends to benefit the village, and that which benefits the village tends to benefit the family, and that which benefits the family tends to benefit the individual.

And acting in a self-sacrificial way in order to benefit the next superior unit can actually be what is in the best interest of the unit that is sacrificing. This, according to the cultural relativist, explains why a socio-economic approach that supports high taxes and broad social benefits is the more ethical option in China.

Many, many examples of cultural relativism can be given. In some indigenous cultures women wear no shirts and this causes no scandal. It doesn’t cause men to lust after them; in fact, men don’t even notice. However, if a woman walks across the campus of a university in North America with her upper body unclothed, that would probably be more than merely a faux pas. It would be immoral, for it would both contradict the mores11 of American culture and potentially cause lustful thoughts in the minds of some who see her. But in the USA it is common for women to wear short skirts, halter tops, and to swim in public wearing swim suits that cover very little of their bodies. This is accepted in the American culture, but can you imagine what would happen if a woman were to dress that way in public in Saudi Arabia? What Americans take to be moral is not the same as what people in other parts of the world take to be moral. And here’s the kicker: each moral system – be it in an indigenous culture, in North America, in China, or in Saudi Arabia – works for the people living therein. According to cultural relativism, each society or culture has its own system of moral values that in effect determines what is morally right and wrong in that society.

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11 In ethics the word “more” is pronounced “moray,” just as in moray eel. Mores are moral values shared by a group of people.

Ruth Benedict

Ruth Benedict was a very influential 20th century American educator, anthropologist, author, and poet. She authored books on cultural anthropology, American Indian culture, Japanese culture, and racism. She taught at Colombia University, served as the editor of the Journal of American Folklore, and was the president of the American Anthropological Association. Her work in cultural anthropology lead her to view many things through the lens of culture, including ethics. Since so many other parts of human life are a byproduct of culture, it’s not surprising that she would conclude that morays are as well.

Cultural relativism is more metaphysical than is moral subjectivism, which is more epistemological in nature. That means that cultural relativism is not merely talking about what we perceive as being right and wrong (remember that epistemology has to do with how we know things) but rather what actually is right and wrong (metaphysics has to do with the actual nature of things, not simply our perceptions of them). According to cultural relativism, each culture or society actually determines what is right or wrong for those living in that culture or society. If your culture says that something is wrong, then, according to this view, it is immoral for you to do it.

Arguments for Relativism

Why would someone think that morality is relative? Well, we’ve already seen some examples of the sort of evidence that leads some people to this conclusion. Some take the wide diversity of ethical systems and moral convictions found throughout the world as evidence that there are no universal moral truths. This has been called the argument from the “diversity thesis.” The diversity thesis affirms that there are no moral principles that are held by all people (there are no “universals”). Based on this evidence, relativists draw two conclusions: 1. Moral values are cultural constructs, and 2. There are no moral absolutes. (A moral absolute is an ethical principle that is binding on all people rather than just the people in a specific culture or society.)

Whether relativists are correct that there are no universal moral truths is open to debate,12 but they are

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12 There are a number of moral values and principles that have been defended as being universal. One example is the Golden Rule (“Do

obviously right that there is a great deal of diversity on moral issues. However, even if the denial of moral universals can be sustained, many ethicists are concerned that the argument from the diversity thesis to relativism is a non sequitur.13

It seems that the problem here is an unfortunate conflation14 of the concepts of “universal” and “absolute.” The former refers, as previously stated, to a moral value that is acknowledged by all people – a value that occurs universally throughout the human race. There may not be any universals, but that doesn’t necessarily show that there are no absolutes – no ethical principles or values that should occur universally throughout the human race.

For example, a moral value held by at least some societies is that it is wrong to torture innocent people. This may not be a universal, for there may be some who think that it is acceptable to torture innocent people. But perhaps those who think torture is OK are simply mistaken, and perhaps it really is wrong to torture innocent people. If that is the case, then even though “thou shall not torture innocent people” is not a universal (for it is not universally accepted) it is still an absolute. Universals and absolutes are not the same thing, and proving that the former do not exist does not prove the nonexistence of the latter.

This, of course, does not prove that there actually are absolutes. It simply shows that disproving the existence of universals – if that can be done – does not also disprove

unto others as you would have them do to you”), which appears in religions and philosophies from every part of the world in very diverse epochs. See Leonard Swidler, “Toward a Universal Declaration of a

Global Ethic,” Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies 3, no.

7 (Spring 2004): 33-6 http://jsri.ro/ojs/index.php/jsri/issue/view/9

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13 A “non sequitur” is a fallacy committed when the conclusion doesn’t follow from the premises that are used to support it. 14 Conflation is the combination of two distinct ideas as if there are no relevant differences between them.

the existence of absolutes. Those who maintain that relativism is mistaken should go on to give reasons for believing that there really are ethical absolutes. Can that be done? Well, at the very least it can be stated that there are some actions that are very difficult to conceive as not being absolutes. For example, could it ever be immoral to “love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself,” as Jesus put it? If not, then this principle (or these two principles, if you prefer) would be a positive ethical absolute. Can you imagine a time when it would ever be right to torture a child simply for the fun of it? If not, then this seems like a strong candidate for a negative ethical absolute (a moral prohibition).

Now let me return to the first conclusion that the relativist draws from the diversity thesis: moral values are cultural constructs. A “cultural construct” is a belief, value, or tradition that is created by and becomes part of a particular culture. When someone asserts that morals are cultural constructs she is saying that morals don’t exist independently of culture but instead are created by a culture, perhaps unconsciously over a long period of time in response to certain events that take place in that culture or certain needs of the people in that culture. For example, a cultural relativist might point out that for most of the known history of the human race owning slaves was not considered immoral, but today slavery is widely considered immoral. She would then argue that contemporary culture has developed a moral value that was absent in earlier cultures: human freedom.

Once again the relativist has hit on some truth. There certainly are things that we consider moral and immoral today that were not considered moral or immoral at other times. In fact, there are quite a few such things, and some of them are very significant – equal rights for women and minorities, for example. But the underlying argument, that the diversity thesis shows that moral values are cultural constructs, seems to commit the very same fallacy that is committed when the relativist uses the diversity thesis to argue that there are no ethical absolutes. Both arguments appear to rely on conflation. In this case what is conflated are the concepts of moral values and ethical absolutes.

In essence the relativist is overlooking the distinction between epistemology and metaphysics. The term “moral values” connotes what people believe is right or wrong: their opinions. The term “ethical absolutes,” on the other hand, refers to what actually is right or wrong independent of what people think. If ethical absolutism is correct, then binding moral principles do exist (in some fashion – we’ll discuss this in a later chapter), regardless of what people believe. You see, the fact that there are a great many opinions about what is right and wrong does not necessarily mean that all (or even several) of the opinions are equally true. (It would be strange if, every time there was widespread disagreement on a subject, the disagreement would be seen as evidence that all of the disputants are equally correct, wouldn’t it?) Hence for the diversity thesis to be used as evidence for relativism either the absence of absolutes must be presupposed (which would beg the question15) or some additional premise or evidence must be added.

One additional piece of evidence that is often thought to be relevant is the observation that those who hold to absolutism seem to have a tendency to be intolerant of those who disagree with them on moral issues. The basic line of reasoning is simple: everyone has a right to his or her own opinion, and therefore people ought to tolerate those who hold to opinions that diverge from their own; absolutism seems to cause people to be intolerant of those whose opinions so diverge; hence absolutism is

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15 To “beg the question” is to assume in your proof the truth of the very issue that is being debated. Begging the question is a fallacy, an illogical way of reasoning.

incompatible with the principle that people ought to be tolerant of others opinions. Therefore absolutism should be rejected. 16

Of course, we all want our opinions to be tolerated by others (or at least most of the time we do – though if we’ve made a blatant or critical mistake we might not). It would be hypocritical for us to want others to tolerate our opinions but to think that we don’t need to tolerate the opinions of others. Hence, at least prima facie,17 tolerance seems to be worth preserving and therefore doctrines like absolutism that undermine tolerance should be viewed with suspicion.

However, with a little reflection a person quickly realizes that the exception mentioned above is actually rather significant, for it encompass a wide range of possible beliefs. For example, very few would argue that we should tolerate the opinions of Nazis wanting to resume the Holocaust or the terrorist belief that attacks on innocent bystanders are a viable way to advance a cause. In fact, the entire legal system seems to be predicated on the assumption that society has the right to limit or even prohibit the practice of many beliefs (the belief that I can drive on public roads at any speed that I want to, that I can take what I want from others without paying, etc.).

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16 Formally this can be written as a disjunctive syllogism: either relativism (and tolerance) or intolerance (and absolutism) is to be preferred; intolerance is not to be preferred; therefore relativism is to be preferred. This syllogism is logically valid, but the truthfulness of the premises can be disputed, and therefore the conclusion is also disputable.

17 Prima facie means “at first appearance.” A prima facie conclusion is a conclusion that one arrives at when one first looks at the evidence on some topic, but such a conclusion may turn out to be wrong, and hence one should not put too much stock in prima facie conclusions. A conclusion arrived at after a thorough scrutiny of all the considerations pertinent to the subject being studied is called ultima facie.

Now notice that we object to at least some of these beliefs that we do not want to tolerate because of moral values other than tolerance. We object to tolerating antisemitism because antisemitism is a grievous injustice; hence in this context we are valuing justice above tolerance. We object to tolerating terrorism because terrorism is a violation of other people’s right to life; hence in this context we value life over tolerance. This suggests that even though we should value tolerance, it is not the only moral value that we prize. We have a range of moral values of which tolerance is one, but it’s not the only one. If that is correct, then a careful examination of tolerance results in a defense not of complete relativism but rather of a system of moral values that includes tolerance as one among several (or perhaps many) prized moral values.

This leads to a strong objection to the argument for relativism based on tolerance. If relativism is rigorously true, then there are no ethical absolutes whatsoever. But the preceding discussion brings out the insight that tolerance is itself a moral value. Hence if the relativist is to be consistent, she must reject tolerance right along with all of the other possible ethical absolutes that she is rejecting. However, she cannot appeal to tolerance in defense of relativism and at the same time reject tolerance because it is an ethical absolute and there are no ethical absolutes. If the relativist believes that tolerance is a binding moral value applicable to all people, then in order to avoid contradicting herself she must admit that there is at least one ethical absolute: tolerance. If, on the other hand, tolerance is not such a binding moral value, then an appeal to it as an argument for relativism lacks force.

It seems that the arguments in favor of ethical relativism are not very strong. Logically speaking, that does not mean that relativism can’t be true, it only means that relativism hasn’t been shown to be true. But there is another way that we could approach the question of the truth or falsity of relativism. We can ask whether it can be shown to be false. Can it?

**Arguments against Relativism**

There are a number of arguments that attempt to show that ethical relativism is false. One is called “the problem of specificity.” Cultural relativism states that moral beliefs are constructed by social groups and hence each set of moral beliefs is binding only within the particular social group that constructed it. But large social groups are composed of smaller social sub-groups, which are themselves composed of even smaller sub-groups, etc. For example, North America is a large social group, one that contrasts sharply with other social groups from around the world. If you’ve ever attended an international conference with other Americans you may have noticed that even if the Americans are from different parts of the country they usually have much more in common with each other than they do with people from many other parts of the world. However, when you compare the Americans to each other you find that there are also significant regional and class differences. I’m a Pennsylvanian, but I’ve lived in the Midwest and now I live in the South, and I can tell you about quite a few differences that I’ve experienced! Even in Pennsylvania there were social sub-groups based on ethnicity, social class, and other things. On the broadest level perhaps all of humanity forms one large social group; on the narrowest level perhaps each individual is his or her own very small social group, having his own cultural peculiarities and moral views.

The question, then, is of which level is the relativist thinking when she affirms that moral beliefs are constructed by and only binding on a social group? Clearly she’s not thinking of the whole human race but rather some subset. Is it the nation? Or the region? Or the race? Or the race in that region? Or the class? Or the class in that nation? Or perhaps it’s the individual that she should be singling out? It’s not clear that there is any good answer to this question. But without a good answer, the view becomes problematically vague, for we no longer have a clear idea what the relevant social group is.

If the relativist takes the broadest view possible (the social group is the whole human race), then even if moral values are social constructs, they are constructs of the whole human race and therefore are binding on everyone. That is as much a version of absolutism as it is relativism, and it’s not what relativists are arguing for anyway. If the relativist takes the narrowest view possible (the social group is the individual), then what the cultural relativist is talking about is no different from individual subjectivism, to which we’ll return shortly. If the relativist takes any position between these two extremes, then she needs to provide a good reason for taking that position or else her choice is arbitrary. An arbitrary position is not based on a good reason, and therefore there isn’t a good reason to think that it is correct.

Regarding individual subjectivism, if it is true, then each person gets to choose not only what to believe is right and wrong, but what actually is right and wrong. And no one can disagree with what an individual has chosen. So if someone chooses terrorism as his or her morality, then terrorism is right for that person. Whatever a person chooses is right, be it antisemitism, racism, slavery, cannibalism, or whatever else you can imagine. But could that actually be the case? Could antisemitism or racism become moral simply by someone deciding that it’s right for her?

The type of argument against individual subjectivism being employed here is called a reductio ad absurdum, which is Latin for “reduction to absurdity.” A reductio ad absurdum works by showing that some principle or idea, if adopted and then followed to its logical end, would lead to a conclusion that is so unlikely that it seems absurd. Here it is being used to show that adopting individual subjectivism would lead to the conclusion that anything at all can be moral if an individual decides that it is moral, which seems absurd. Is torturing children for fun moral just because some sadist decides that it is? Or is it more likely that the sadist is mistaken in his belief that it is moral? I’m strongly inclined toward the latter option, as are most ethicists.

Here’s another reductio that, like the one above, suggests that there is something amiss with both individual subjectivism and cultural relativism. If relativism is true, then whatever a society (or individual, in the case of subjectivism) currently accepts as being moral actually is moral for that society. If that’s the case, then doing anything other than what is currently accepted as being moral is doing something that is not moral. Hence no moral changes should be viewed as moral progress, for they would always involve moving away from what is currently practiced toward something else, which would perforce involve moving away from what is moral toward what is not. In short, if relativism is true, then the concept of moral progress is vacuous.

For example: for much of the history of the world, women have not been viewed as being equal to men. Our history is one of women being dominated by men. If relativism is true, then during those times when male hegemony was accepted as the norm, male hegemony was moral. Hence moving toward a more egalitarian society in which the value and rights of women are on par with those of men would be immoral.

Can that really be the case? Or could it be the case that a cannibalistic society really is just as moral as one that is not cannibalistic, and that a racist society really is just as moral as one that is not racist, etc.? If you think that these are unlikely, then you should also regard relativism with suspicion.

Conclusion

Relativism begins with some legitimate insights. For one thing, the fact that moral judgments are culturally relative seems obvious. This explains the wide diversity of moral views in the world. Furthermore, we can agree that one ought to be tolerant of the views of others as long as those views do not lead to unacceptable consequences. However, neither of these points actually supports the conclusion that there are no moral absolutes once we recognize the important difference between moral judgments and moral absolutes. That the former are relative does not at all entail that the latter are (or that the latter do not exist).

We have seen that the arguments for relativism are not very strong. On the other hand, the arguments against relativism seem pretty convincing. Therefore the most reasonable conclusion is that relativism is mistaken; relativism is not true. If relativism is not true, then objective moral values are not relative. If such values are not relative, then they must be absolute. Hence the conclusion that relativism is not true entails the opposite conclusion about absolutism: absolutism is true; ethical absolutes exist.

If we are right in concluding that absolutism is true, then our metaethical question becomes “What are the moral absolutes?” But in order to answer that question, we must first answer the question “How can we find the moral absolutes?” We turn to that question next.

**Louis Pojman**

**Louis Pojman was a much respected 20th century American philosopher, educator, and author. He was also an ordained minister of the Reformed Church of America. He held two earned doctorates, taught at many universities in the US and Great Britain, published a very long list of books and articles, and received numerous grants and fellowships. His areas of specialization were ethics and philosophy of religion. While one might expect his ethical thought to flow from his religious convictions and therefore be of little interest to those who are skeptical about religion, in fact he often approached ethics from a common-ground perspective that renders his arguments available to all.**