

Part II

The Challenge of Moral Skepticism

Chapter 4

Cultural Relativism

4.1 Homework

Readings – EMP 2

Study Questions – Give a short answer to the following questions:

1. What is Moral Relativism?
2. What is the Cultural Differences Argument?
3. Why is the Cultural Differences Argument not sound?
4. What evidence speaks in favor of Moral Relativism?
5. What evidence speaks against Moral Relativism?

4.2 Cultural Differences: what do draw from it?

Let us start with an undeniable fact – Cultures differ in their moral norms.

- Greeks v. Callatians on funerary customs
- Eskimos v. Europeans on babies and old people

We can add other (emotionally loaded) examples at our leisure.

Now the question is: what do we draw from this fact? – Here we have several options, two of which we will consider today

1. **Moral Circumspection:** we should not jump on judging values of other societies from the point of view of our own values

This is why moral relativism is appealing: it is a remedy against dogmatism and self-centered view of values.

Especially important for us in the Western culture: loaded history (slavery, colonization, etc.)

All this is fine, but moral relativism is more than a simple word of caution in favor of open-mindedness and tolerance.

2.

Cultural Relativism:

Definition 13 – Cultural Relativism

Cultural Relativism is the view that there is no objective moral truth, that morality is just a set of culture dependent values, and that we should act accordingly

This is much more than what is said in one: this is *a view on what morality is*, and *normative* theory for our moral practice.

It is important to see the difference between the two conclusions that are drawn above from the simple fact of moral diversity.

Compare with science – It is a fact that there are profound disagreements over methods, radical controversies about theories. What do we want to draw from this?

1. A word of caution: our actual scientific theories are probably not the final word on what the world is like and on the best way to know the world.

2. Scientific Relativism: there is no objective scientific truth, and we should act accordingly

What kind of scientific research would then be possible? What would scientific activity look like? Should we jump out of the window?

This comparison should help understand that there must be something wrong with the reasoning leading from the differences between cultures to Moral Relativism.

Unacceptable consequences of Cultural Relativism – If we take Cultural Relativism seriously, then we would be committed to unacceptable claims:

1. *We could no longer say that the customs of some societies are morally inferior to others.*

This seems to have unacceptable consequences. In taking moral relativism seriously, we would have no way to criticize human rights abuses. Political prisoners, slaughter of peaceful protesters, jailing of political dissidents, woman or child abuse.

2. *We could decide whether our actions are right or wrong just by consulting the standards of our society.*

If Cultural Relativism is true, then nobody can criticize the values of his or her society – is that acceptable? don't you think there are clear cases where individuals disagree with the moral code of their own society?

Example:

- Resistance in France and Germany. Cavailles: "I did not study philosophy to teach "Work, Family, Fatherland" .

- Civil Rights

If Cultural Relativism were true, there would be no way to criticize the status quo, no way to make our own societies progress.

3. *The idea of moral progress is called into doubt.*

Many view the progress of society as one which gets better. Racial equality, suffrage for women, etc. But there is no way to view this as progress within the cultural relativist model. Indeed, no value is "better" than others, no reform is "for the best", there is only change.

Conclusion – There is something intriguing about moral relativism

On the one hand, it seems appealing, and driven by open-mindedness and tolerance

On the other hand, if taken as a view on morality, it seems to have unacceptable consequences, and hence be unacceptable.

Our main goal: distinguish between various elements, and assess which are correct, which are unacceptable.

4.3 Cultural Relativism and the Cultural Differences Argument

Cultural relativism has been extremely influential in our times. The most common argument given in its support is what we'll call the Cultural Differences Argument.

Cultural Relativism analyzed – Five claims made by cultural relativists:

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society.
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. In other words, there is no "universal truth" in ethics; there are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.
4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.
5. It is mere arrogance for us to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures.

The Cultural Differences Argument – Core Argument in support of Cultural Relativism

1. Different cultures have different moral code.
2. Therefore, there is no objective truth in morality. The notions of right and wrong, moral values are culture-dependent.

Why is the Cultural Difference Argument not valid? – Here is one important way to see why the argument does not stand:

It argues from people's beliefs about something to facts about that thing. But it is possible for something to be a matter of fact while people being just ignorant about it. *One can never derive a substantive conclusion about a subject just from what people believe about it.*

If this argument was valid, then we could also say, using the same form of argument, and true premises:

- About the Earth:
 1. Different cultures have different beliefs concerning the shape of the Earth.
 2. Therefore, there is no objective truth about whether the Earth is flat or round
- About God:
 1. Different cultures have different beliefs concerning whether there is a God or not
 2. Therefore, there is no objective truth about whether there is a God or not

Another way in which the argument is invalid – there are at least two other ways to criticize the cultural differences argument, the first is again about the form of the argument:

It derives an universal claim from a finite number of instances

This is logically unacceptable: Russell's chicken

Why is the Cultural Difference Argument not sound? – the last way in which the Cultural Difference argument fails is due to its assumptions:

One assumption is that cultures are easily separated, but really there are not! We live in a constant melting pot of overlapping cultures.

Another assumption is that society do not share any values. Which is simply false.

Conclusion – Our conclusion is that the cultural differences argument is not sound and does not support Cultural Relativism.

Note that we have not shown that cultural relativism is false, just that the argument above is not a good reason to believe that cultural relativism is true, that is, cultural relativism remains unsupported! This is very different

So, we have shown that there does not seem to be good reasons to believe that moral relativism is true. The next section is devoted to show that there are good reasons to believe it is false.

4.4 Against Moral Relativism: Cultural Agreement

Moral relativism stems from the observation of ethical facts. It is supposed to *be a view compatible with the observations we can make on ethical behavior among societies*.

Compare with science again: a theory of gravity should be compatible with the observations we make of the behavior massive bodies. Similarly, a theory of morality should be compatible with the observations we make of the behavior of moral agents. *The problem is that moral relativism fails to account for the good deal of agreement that exists between cultures*. Let us see this in more details.

Facts that moral relativism does not account for – There are two important facts that moral relativism fail to account for:

1. There is a good deal of agreement between societies concerning moral values
2. Even when societies differ in their customs, it does not necessarily means that they differ in their values

Common values, Necessary values – Often the moral disagreements between cultures are particularly striking, but that ignores the agreements.

- All cultural groups must protect (at least some of) their infants to ensure survival.
- Truth telling
- Prohibition on killing innocents

→ *All societies will have these rules, simply because these rules are necessary to have societies in the first place.*

Customs and Values – The cultural difference arguments is often based on observation of customs in society. It is assumed that to observe customs is a good way to observe values. The problem with this is that customs do not reflect values:

- Differences in customs does not necessarily imply differences in values: Grandma the cow.
- Similarities in customs does not necessarily imply similarities in values: many kinds of vegetarians
- SO: to have the same customs are neither necessary nor sufficient to have the same values.

It is important to inquire into the reasons for moral judgments. Oftentimes, there is much less disagreement than it seems at first sight.

Conclusion – Cultural relativism accounts for the undeniable fact that there are differences between cultures concerning moral values. But it fails to account for an other undeniable fact, which is that there are many values that are shared between cultures.

Compare with science again: moral relativism is like a theory of gravity which accounts for a restricted portions of the experimental data available: let's us it would account for the stones falling down toward the center of the Earth, but would not explain why the Moon is not falling down on us. This would not be an acceptable theory of gravity.

Likewise, moral relativism is not an acceptable theory of morality.

4.5 What can we learn from moral relativism

Cultural relativism re-assessed – If we go back to the 5 claims of cultural relativism, we can see that none of them seems really convincing anymore

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
→ *True, but there is a lot of agreement as well as a lot of superficial disagreement.*
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society.
→ *This fails to account for fundamental features of our moral life. Namely that certain socially accepted practices are just wrong, that societies can make progress in their accepted values.*
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. In other words, there is no "universal truth" in ethics; there are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.
→ *Quite the contrary: there seems to be necessary rules for any society to be a society in the first place. There is no society without basic rules of social living.*
4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.
→ *True, but it misses the point. Of course not all values in our societies are the best. This does not mean that no values are better than others. We might have preferences for certain values over others independently of the society they originate from.*
Example: Western vs. African societies on old people.
5. It is mere arrogance for us to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures.
→ *Tolerance is good, but it need not mean that we have to tolerate everything. Tolerance does not necessarily imply suspending our judgment, it means be careful about these judgments, make sure we understand the situation well and that we have put aside our prejudices.*

Lessons from cultural relativism and its failure – What we can learn is that we need to find a middle ground between:

- self-centered dogmatism: the view that one's values are superior and unquestionably so – they constitute the absolute, objective moral truths
- mere relativism – the view that no value is better than others, that there are no objective moral truth

We have to find a way to judging a cultural practice to be morally undesirable without falling back in dogmatism

Is there a culturally neutral standard of right and wrong?

Example: Female genital mutilation

Facts about FGM. pain. permanent loss of sexual pleasure, infection, etc. no obvious social benefits.

Potential justification: females that can experience little pleasure are not likely to be promiscuous. They are said to be more attentive to the needs of their family. Men will not want not circumcised women etc.

Proposed standard to judge any social practice: Does the practice promote or hinder the welfare of those affected by it?

Distinguishing between customs and values Could we distinguish between different types of values?

- Core values – mostly common, variations are unacceptable
- Peripheral values and customs – varies – domain of tolerance

