

**Part II**  
**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. Moral Relativism: the view that there is no objective moral truth, 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?

This comparison should help understand that to take seriously moral relativism is not free of rather heavy consequences for our lives.

**What is at stake** – If we take Moral Relativism seriously :

1. *We could no longer say that the customs of other societies are morally inferior to our own.*

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.

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

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

There is no way to criticize the status quo, no way to make our own societies progress. Think about civil rights...

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, it seems to have unacceptable consequence.

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

### 4.3 Moral Relativism and the Cultural Differences Argument

Moral 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.

**Moral Relativism analyzed** – Five claims made by moral 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. Right and wrong are a matter of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

**Why is this not a valid argument?** – 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 their to be facts and for people to not have access to those facts. One cannot derive a substantive conclusion about a subject just from what people believe about it.

If this argument was sound, 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

**Other ways in which the argument is unsound** – there are at least two other ways to criticize the cultural differences argument

1. It derives an universal claim from a finite number of instances

This is logically unacceptable: Russell's chicken

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

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

Note that our conclusion is \*not\* that moral relativism is false, just that the argument above is not a good reason to believe that moral relativism is the right way to think about morality.

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 from 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** – Often the moral disagreements between cultures are particularly striking, but that ignores the agreements.

- All cultural groups must protect their infants to ensure survival.
- Truth telling
- Prohibition on killing innocents
- Add: incest and the hermit in the mountains

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

**Customs and Values** – Customs do not necessarily 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

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

**Conclusion** – Moral relativism accounts for the undeniable fact that there are differences between 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. 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

**Moral relativism re-assessed** – If we go back to the 5 claims of moral 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.  
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.

Well, that seems to conflict with the examples above. Indeed, remember the moral rule that was proposed.

4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.

Yes, but it misses the point.

It is not because it is accepted by our society that we accept a value for ourselves. There are values in other societies that we can judge being better than ours !

Example: African society and old people.

Not all values in our societies are the best. This does not mean that no values are better than others.

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 okay, but it need not mean that we tolerate everything. Tolerance does not necessarily imply holding our judgment. We can judge but remain tolerant about it !

**Lessons from moral 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

**A middle ground for moral judgment** – 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 circumcised women.

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

Tension with relativism. That said, such a standard seems relevant to any culture.

**Distinguishing between values** Could we distinguish between different types of values?

- core values – mostly common, variations are unacceptable – murder
- peripheral values and customs – varies – domain of tolerance – funerary habits