

Relativism: An Argument in Favour
Michael Lacewing

1. A clarification

The term ‘relativism’ is used in two different ways in the OCR Philosophy of Religion and Ethics syllabus. Worse still, the syllabus conflates the two uses. One meaning relates to normative theories; the other relates to metaethics. Some types of normative moral theory, e.g. act utilitarianism and situation ethics, claim that types of action, e.g. abortion and euthanasia, are not always right or wrong. It depends on the particular, individual situation. Whether an action is right or wrong for these theories is *relative to the situation*. But notice that both act utilitarianism and situation ethics hold on to one *absolute standard*, that an act is right if it causes the greatest happiness or is a loving act.

The other meaning relates to metaethics. Metaethical relativism claims that moral judgements, e.g. ‘euthanasia is wrong’, are true or false relative to a particular culture. There is no absolute truth about morality, and no absolute moral standards that are correct or incorrect, only what different cultures think.

‘Relativism’ in popular culture can relate to all sorts of disagreements over all sorts of knowledge claims. In academic discussions of ethics, the metaethical meaning is the standard one; and it is the sense I will be discussing today.

2. An argument in favour of relativism

All relativism starts with disagreement; it claims that two cultures that disagree over a moral practice or judgement are actually making claims that are each ‘true for them’. Relativism in ethics is more attractive to many people than relativism about scientific claims. To understand why, we should look at the nature of disagreement in science and ethics. In particular, how we can understand what would explain an *end* to disagreement in each case? Whether or not we actually reach agreement on scientific or ethical matters is irrelevant here. The question is, if we did, how would we explain how that came about? With science, the best explanation would be that the scientific theories we have agreed upon represent how the world is – the world has *guided* our investigations, confirming or falsifying hypotheses through experiment, until we understood what the world is like. In ethics, this doesn’t seem to be true. To see this, we need to think more about ethical practices.

There are two ways of understanding ethical practices. We can either say that different cultures, with their different ethical practices, their different ethical concepts, their different ethical judgments, are all trying to get at the *truth* about ethics, just as scientists are trying to find out the truth about the world. Or we can say that ethical practices are simply part of a culture’s *way of living*. The relativist, of course, will say the latter.

The idea that two cultures are both trying to find ‘the truth’ about ethics doesn’t sit well with an understanding of the history of culture and how ethical practices develop. And since at least one culture is wrong, we would also need to explain why that culture had ‘got it wrong’: why couldn’t people in that culture see what was independently right and do that? This is a very awkward question. Relativism, however, understands ethical practices as part of a culture; ethical practices have developed to help people find their way around a social world. But there are *many* social worlds, many cultures, and they have developed different ways of doing things. And this is

the crucial contrast with science, which investigates the *one* physical world. There is just one physical world which can guide scientific investigations towards agreement, but there is not just one social world which can guide ethical practices towards agreement.

Ethical disagreements between cultures, then, are disagreements over which social world is better. But the only resources we have with which to answer this question are the ethical resources developed within a particular social world. (A culture's ethical resources are whatever someone who lived in and was familiar with only that culture could use to talk about and understand ethical questions.) Therefore, as long as the resources of each culture support its social world over the alternative, those ethical practices are right for that culture, and neither answer is more correct than the other.

The relativism I'm defending does not claim that all social practices are acceptable, that no individual and no practice can be condemned. People do wrong all the time, and relativism does not pretend otherwise. But it claims that to condemn an action or practice as wrongful, one must use resources from *within the culture* to which that practice or individual belongs. Relativism, then, only applies when the reasons for a particular social world stem from within it while the reasons against it stem from outside that world, from a *different* culture.

3. *An important concession*

This form of relativism could be true and yet irrelevant. If the objectivist can successfully argue that certain reasons are universally available – e.g. on the basis of a universal human nature – then it is possible that certain practices can be universally condemned. This is, in effect, to argue that there are standards for better or worse social worlds provided by human nature.

But relativism is not wholly undermined by such 'universal values'. First, these 'universal values' emerge from *within* each culture, so the idea of appealing only to each culture's ethical resources remains; second, the values are *differently interpreted* in each; and third, *there is no universal way of ranking them*. Fourth, they support and embody many values that are not universal, and which cannot be, for they could not be realized at the same time – in any set of practices – as other non-universal values. All-in-all, specific ethical practices are more than interpretations of 'universal values'.

Once we recognise this type of value pluralism and incommensurability, which we must when we understand the nature of ethical practices, relativism appears to be a very *attractive* option. All ways of living a human life are culturally specific, and these culturally specific ways cannot be co-ordinated into a single overarching way.

Further reading

Lacewing, M. "A Relative Defence", *Think*, Vol. 3

Williams, B. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Ch. 8, 9

MacIntyre, A. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*