

## **Relativism**

### **THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN DESCRIPTIVE AND NORMATIVE RELATIVISM**

Relativism is a set of views about the relationship between morality and a culture or society. Descriptive relativism claims that as a matter of fact, moral codes differ from one society to the next. According to one society, slavery is permissible under certain conditions; according to another, it is never permissible; or again, female circumcision is right v. it is wrong; or all people should be treated as equals v. people should be treated according to their caste. Descriptive relativism is a factual claim, and one that certainly seems correct.

From this factual claim, some people infer normative (or ‘cultural’ or ‘metaethical’) relativism. This is the view that there is no objective moral standard independent from what a culture endorses. There is no objective moral truth which is true for all people at all times. As a result, we cannot say that a moral value or practice of a society is objectively right or wrong. Instead, to talk of what is ‘morally right’ only makes sense in relation to a specific, culturally-relative morality. ‘Right’ in a culture is ‘right according to the culture’s morality’. To use any other standard of morality to judge what is right or wrong in a culture is misguided. We cannot meaningful use the standards of our society or appeal to ‘objective’ standards to judge a different culture.

The inference from descriptive to normative relativism is, however, not straightforward. Disagreement isn’t enough for relativism. If two people disagree, one could be wrong. It’s the same with cultures. There could be objective moral truth about which one culture is mistaken.

Relativism is a form of non-cognitivism, but at the social level. There is no objective moral truth, and morality is an expression of a culture. However, for individuals, there is moral truth – what is right or wrong, for any individual, is defined by what their culture says is right or wrong. Relativism does not make morality ‘subjective’, but relative to culture. It does not deny that people act wrongly. 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. You can’t judge a practice from outside a culture.

### **MORAL JUDGEMENTS AS SOCIAL CONVENTIONS RELATIVE TO A GIVEN SOCIAL GROUP**

There are two ways of understanding ethical disagreements between cultures. The cognitivist must argue that different cultures, with their different ethical values and practices are all trying to get at the truth about ethics. The relativist argues that this is implausible, and ethical practices are simply part of a culture’s way of living. Relativism claims that two cultures that disagree over a moral practice or judgement are actually making claims that are each ‘true for them’.

We can support relativism by comparing the idea of moral truth to the idea of scientific truth, and looking at the nature of disagreement in science and ethics. How can we understand what would explain an end to disagreement in each case? With science, the best explanation is 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. Science investigates the one physical world.

By contrast, the idea that two cultures which disagree 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 in a disagreement, at least one culture is wrong, we 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 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 social conventions. There is not just one social world which can guide ethical practices towards agreement.

## **OBJECTIONS**

### **Relativism and human nature**

Cognitivists argue that normative relativism does not follow from descriptive relativism. First, they draw attention to just how many general ethical principles and virtues different cultures share. For example, most cultures have prohibitions on killing, lying, and theft, and encourage care of the weak. If disagreement supports the view that there is no universal moral truth, then agreement supports the view that there is. Second, they can say that different ethical practices reflect the different particular conditions in which different cultures are situated, but not different ethical principles.

Suppose, as Aristotle argues, that the aim of morality is to achieve the best life for human beings. All human beings live in some culture or other; and we need to be able to lead our lives in the culture we find ourselves in. To some degree, what traits we need to live a good life will vary from one culture to another. But, because we have a common human nature, some traits will always be important, such as courage, loyalty, self-control, and so on. On the basis of these ideas, we may be able to criticise different cultures for having the ‘wrong’ list of virtues and values on the grounds that they don’t really help people lead a good life.

The relativist can respond that there is no one idea of the ‘best life’ for human beings. This idea is itself culturally relative. Furthermore, not all cultures agree that human beings are equal (Aristotle himself supported the idea of slavery!) – the best life might be ‘rightly’ reserved for a privileged few, according to that culture.

### **The possibility of judging the abhorrent practices of other cultures/individuals**

If there is no objective moral truth, then doesn’t it follow that ‘anything goes’? If morality is a reflection of social conventions, and my social conventions are different from yours, then who are you to tell me that my morality is wrong? The denial of moral truth implies tolerance, many people claim, because no one can correct anyone else.

This can become an objection to the theory, since although tolerance can appear to be a virtue, it can also be a vice. Should we tolerate every practice, including racism, sexism,

female circumcision...? Doesn't morality require that we 'take a stand' against what is wrong?

If morality is simply a set of conventions relative to my society, then morality has no authority over me (or anyone else). I can do whatever I like, as long as I don't get caught. 'Morality' becomes no more than a matter of taste. And if this is so, then morality cannot provide any firm grounds for morally judging the practices of other people.

Relativists will respond that there are moral values, independent of any individual. Morality is not subjective. Within a culture, we can use moral standards to judge other's abhorrent practices straightforwardly. The whole point of morality is to enable us to do this. The problem for the relativist arises when it comes to the practices of other cultures. On this, many relativists have advocated tolerance. To use our standards to judge other cultures is misguided – so we should be tolerant of them.

### Tolerance and its limits

However, the denial of moral truth does not necessarily lead to tolerance for two reasons. First, tolerance is itself a moral value. 'You ought to tolerate other people's values, because there are no moral values' is self-contradictory. We only ought to be tolerant if tolerance is a good or right thing to be. So, turning the tables, who are you to tell someone else to be tolerant? This is no different then saying they ought not to eat meat or ought not to be racist. It is a moral claim. The denial of moral truth doesn't entail that we ought to be tolerant or that we ought not to be tolerant. This causes a problem for relativism. Different cultures have different conventions relating to tolerance: some cultures endorse tolerance, some are not tolerant at all.

Second, if my morality is different from yours, then not only will I disagree with you about whether a particular action is right or wrong, I may also disapprove of people who disagree with me and try to persuade them to change their mind. Morality does not present itself as simply a matter of conventions, relative to a particular society. We apply our morality (if not all, then parts of it) to everyone, not just our own society. Can relativism coherently disapprove of this practice?

### The possibility of moral progress and moral mistakes

A final objection to relativism is that it does not allow for the idea of moral progress. If there is no moral reality, then our moral conventions cannot become better or worse. Obviously, they have changed – people used to believe that slavery was morally acceptable and now they do not. But how can we say that this is progress if there is no objective moral truth? (Cognitivists can say that we have become more humane than in the past, and there is greater agreement about moral judgements than before because we are discovering real moral truths.) There are two responses relativists can give.

First, they can claim that there can be very real improvements in people's moral views if they become more rational. This can happen in several different ways. First, people may come to know certain facts that they didn't know before. In the case of slavery, people believed many things about slaves that were not true (one popular false belief was that they were stupid). Moral progress here means basing one's morality on the facts, not mistakes. Second, people can become more consistent, more willing to universalize their principles. Some utilitarians, such as Peter Singer, argue that if we were consistent in our feelings about preventing suffering, we would not eat meat. If he is right, then vegetarianism would be moral progress. Third, people can become more coherent in

their moral judgements. Many of us have moral feelings that come into conflict with each other, e.g. over abortion. Moral progress here would be a matter of working out the implications of our views, and changing what needed changing to make them coherent with each other.

Because people are ignorant, do not always think logically, and have not resolved the conflicts between their different feelings and conventions, there is plenty of room for moral progress. But moral progress just means becoming more rational in our moral thinking, not becoming more 'correct' in our moral judgements.

The second response relativists can give is this: If we disapprove of past moral codes and approve of our own moral code, then we will say that we have made moral progress. Society has moved from moral principles that were bad (i.e. principles we disapprove of according to our current set of conventions) to moral principles that are good (i.e. principles we approve of). That is what moral progress is.

This response means that moral progress is relative a particular moral point of view. If you disagree with me, you might claim that today's moral principles are much worse than those 200 years ago and so we have not made moral progress. But this is now just the familiar problem of how to make sense of moral disagreement, not a special problem about moral progress.