

Moral Relativism V. Moral Objectivism

Relativism Claims

- **Descriptive** ethical relativism
 - Claims as a matter of fact that different cultures have different moral values—a claim that is not generally disputed.
- **Normative** ethical relativism or metaethical relativism (Pojman calls this view **conventionalism**.)
 - Claims that each culture is right unto itself, i.e., persons in a specific culture **ought to** conform to that culture's values.

Relativism Claims

Moral relativists hold that we cannot gain a sufficient understanding of another culture to criticize the ethical principles and behaviors of the culture.

The corollary of that claim is that persons from other cultures cannot understand our culture sufficiently to criticize us.

Moral Relativism

- This is a view held by Ruth Benedict, Gilbert Harman, Montaigne, Melville Herskovits, etc.
- When we observe a variety of cultures, we see many different values and practices.
- Therefore, what is right is purely dependent upon our culture.
- There is no objective way to say any act or belief is right or wrong beyond what the culture prescribes.

Relativism Claims

- Gilbert Harman argues that to say of a person, "He did the right thing (or wrong thing)," only makes sense in light of certain moral principles held by his culture.
- He does concede, however, that **certain values may be objectively better than others in bringing well-being to a culture.**
- In granting that, Harman has moved to moral objectivism. If some beliefs or practices make for a better culture, then there is reliance on some **external, objective standard.**

Fundamental Questions About Descriptive Relativism

While customs, values and behaviors may be different, is it possible there may be underlying values that are similar?

For example, while the specific behavior towards one's parents may change according to culture, don't most cultures have the view that offspring owe some reciprocal duties to their parents?

Questions About Moral Relativism

What exactly constitutes a “culture”? If we are a part of more than one culture, to which cultural group do we owe ultimate allegiance? Which cultural group trumps the others?

- Nation?
- Ethnic group
- Religion?
- Families or clans?
- Why not Individuals?

Questions About Moral Relativism: Why Should Moral Values Hold such Special Place (A Sacred Cow)

When cultures hold differing scientific views, e.g., the world is flat/the world is round, we do not hesitate to say one culture is wrong.

If some culture holds, **contrary to the values of almost all cultures**, that enslaving a particular ethnic group or killing all Jews is morally good, isn't it just as logical to say that culture holds false moral principles?

Fundamental Questions About Moral Relativism

Must we claim that every aspect of morality should be relative to the culture, or can some behaviors, e. g.,

- torturing innocent children,
- slavery, or
- killing Jews or Palestinians or Hutus or Christians or Muslims, etc.,--cross some objective standard that people generally would adhere to?

Fundamental Questions About Moral Relativism

If, as it appears, most of us belong to a number of competing “cultures,” then the claim that cultures are so isolated that we cannot understand and make judgments about another culture is false.

In fact, it is common for us to make judgments among several cultural influences, and to decide which moral principles we prefer.

Questions About Moral Relativism

Herskovits argues for moral relativism. In fact, he claims that since we cannot legitimately judge the ethics of another culture, we have a responsibility to be tolerant of other cultures.

Pojman points out that Herskovits is claiming there is **one objective ethical claim that binds us all**: being tolerant. But if that is an objective value, then relativism is false.

Questions About Moral Relativism

Bertrand Russell points out that ethical relativism implies that anyone who breaks from the moral values of his culture is doing wrong.

However, he claims, the opposite is often true. **We honor those “reformers” who attempt to “improve” on a cultural norm**. If a reformer attempts to eliminate the practice of slavery in a culture, for example, she does it by claiming allegiance to some **objective value** beyond the culture itself, perhaps a principle of human liberty. Perhaps she feels intuitively that another value would be better at enhancing human happiness.

One Possible Counter Claim to Relativism: Absolutism

Absolutism makes the claim that there are absolute values above and beyond any prevailing cultural values. The source of this absolute authority could be

- the pope or other religious leader
- the King
- God
- Nature itself

An Intermediate Position: Moral Objectivism

- Pojman's position, moral objectivism, takes a more moderate position. He claims the following:
- **“Moral goodness has something to do with the ameliorating of suffering, the resolution of conflict, and the promotion of human flourishing” (Pojman, The Moral Life, 3rd ed. 187).**

Pojman's Arguments (Claims) for a Limited Moral Objectivism

Pojman first claims that **“It is morally wrong to torture people for the fun of it”** is an objectively true principle.

He claims that if some rare culture holding an opposing view were to come into existence, it makes more sense to say that one culture's behavior is ethically wrong than to say torturing people for fun is morally good if the culture says it is.

A Counter Claim: Absolutism

Strengths:

- It does appear that we need to appeal to some values outside our culture.
- We should not tolerate everything.

Weaknesses:

Whose God or King or religious leader is the one absolute source of ethical principles?

This view implies we don't learn from experiences and each other in improving our culture's values; rather, we depend on the authority to tell us what is right.

Pojman's Arguments for a Limited Moral Objectivism

- The claim that there are objective moral values does not require or depend on a belief in God or a religion.
- There may be competing sets of proposed objective moral principles.
- The objective moral principles may not be “real,” that is, they may not have a separate existence apart from human needs, and they may not be “absolute.”

Pojman's Arguments for a Limited Moral Objectivism

- Pojman calls the view that values are dependent on the culture “weak dependency.”
- He makes a case for “strong dependency,” the view that **values are largely dependent on a common human nature that we all share.**
- “Morally as well as physically, there is only one world, and we all have to live in it.” (Mary Midgley)

Pojman's Arguments for a Limited Moral Objectivism

- "Moral principles are functions of human needs and interests
- Some moral principles will promote human interests and meet human needs better than others."
- Those moral principles that meet human needs better are "objectively valid."
- ". . . There is an objectively valid set of moral principles" (Pojman. The Moral Life. 185).

Arguments for a Limited Moral Objectivism

A number of philosophers, e.g., Confucius, Hobbes, Kant, Locke, etc., claim that our fundamental reasoning power teaches us that we should treat others in a way we would like to be treated, or that we should not do to others that which we would not have them do to us. If that is true, then it could be argued that our own reasoning could be an objective standard by which to evaluate cultural norms.

Moral Objectivism and Situational Ethics

Pojman's moral objectivism does not imply that the same moral rule would necessarily exist for all persons in all cultures in all situations.

It makes a much more limited claim; it argues that it is possible to evaluate whether some moral principle is better or worse than another. As the situation changes, the ethical principle may as well.

In Pojman's mention of Ross, for example, Ross may argue that it is a "*prima facie*" obligation to tell the truth. However, if lying will save a life, it is likely we might have a stronger obligation to save a life than to tell the truth. **at first glance"

Pojman's Arguments for a Limited Moral Objectivism

We assert that other cultures can be wrong about scientific facts. Isn't it logical that cultures, including our own, can be wrong about moral claims?

Isn't it possible, for example, that the practice of slavery was objectively not as good as the moral practice of treating all people as equals? Isn't that the reason we honor people such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Moral Objectivism and Tolerance

We need to distinguish in our minds the difference between saying **a person is bad** because she does something that is an accepted practice in her culture, and **asserting that the principle or behavior is objectively bad**.

For example, moral objectivism does not imply that we must condemn cannibals who eat human flesh because that is accepted in their culture.

At the same time, objectivists can claim that the practice of cannibalism is not best suited to ameliorating suffering or bringing happiness and prosperity to that culture.

Pojman's Arguments for a Limited Moral Objectivism

"Moral goodness has something to do with the ameliorating of suffering, the resolution of conflict, and the promotion of human flourishing" (Pojman, The Moral Life, 3rd ed. 187).

Our Task

First, be clear in our minds the distinction between saying we should not judge a person who does what he does because he was raised in a different culture and the philosophic question of whether there are grounds for being critical of any cultural belief or practice, including our own.

Outline the pros and cons for each position.

Write an effective argument.