

# Ethical Relativism and Morality

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## Abstract

As an egoistic nature, the human being finds it difficult to be relative to others and absolute to himself, while he is inclined to believe that others should be relative to him.

The moment we want to make a step in our life, perhaps at an early age, we face another idea, desire or belief. It is this period which proves that our beliefs are personal creations that take life when we allow ourselves to engage in the broader social circle.

The individual is unable to accomplish himself if he does not become part of the nucleus to which he belongs, where he also gets the energies needed in adapting his ego to the universal one, which is the world itself.

This paper provides in-depth analysis of what moral is in the ethical relativism: different for every human being, depending on the view point of the person affected and the conditions a person is placed in. None the less, all of these are also affected by the society, a person is born and raised in, being it the ruling norm in the family, the social interactions, traditions and customs executed, which determine the concept of moral actions to everyone.

**Key words:** Ethical relativism; social custom; moral beliefs; different; individual;

## 1. Introduction: Cultural Relativity

Ethical relativism claims that morality is dependent on context and subjective. There is no universal right and wrong that can be rationally determined. Ethical relativism is the doctrine that the moral rightness and wrongness of actions varies from society to society and that there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all men at all times. Accordingly, it holds that whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he belongs. (Ladd, 1973, p. 1). The principle of non-exclusion of the other, or tolerance of "differences" in the social sense, implies: "The right of the other to represent his view". Such an approach creates the opportunity to 'accept' the value of the other. (Levy, 2004, p. 68). We can say that ethical relativism has no generally valid moral norms, because in different regions, times and conditions, different people have different thinking about what 'good' and 'bad' is. Thus, "different societies have different customs and that each person thinks his own society's customs are best. But no set of social customs, Herodotus said, is really better or worse than any other." (Duignan, 2011, p. 106) While David Hume (1711-76) claimed that moral beliefs are based on "sentiment," or emotion, rather than on reason.

This leads us to the understanding that man is the main component why today the world is a diversity of cultures, thoughts, tastes and beliefs.

The world as a whole is a mosaic of colors where each one of us has the right to paint what we want. And when we talk about the right to be the one we want, to do what we want, to believe what we want, undoubtedly have to bear in mind that everything we want and do is personal freedom that lasts until the moment that it physically and morally violates the other's freedom.

From this we realize that the universal mosaic we talk about is nothing more than a complex of personal mosaics that can coexist with each other.

So is the world itself, a complex of societies, societies are complex of individuals and individuals are complex of beliefs. Believing is a process that comes as a result of different beliefs you face when confronting others who are part of your culture.

And what does culture really represent?

"...the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next" (Matsumoto, 1996, p. 16) Rather, culture is nothing

but lifestyle according to certain rules which are part of a factual constitution created by people's own beliefs.

People develop moral thinking as a result of their interaction with other individuals and social institutions. Different cultures have different ideas on how one should morally behave. So there are different rules, or ideas on morality that differ from one culture to another.

Recently people have become more aware of the word "different". All of this comes as a result of existentialists' ideas who, with their theory of radical freedom, individual choice and responsibility, lined morality as an element of the sphere of self-determination. There is no a priori meaning in human life, no purpose. It is only after I exist that I create my own meaning. Because, rather than inheriting meaning, I create it myself – I am free to make my own choices (and have no choice but to choose). That I am condemned to be free is one of the few a priori truths. (Sartre, 2007, pp. 295–297)

The very existence of the human being shows that in their absence there was no life or rule, and when people were created the rules belong to them to create and apply.

Hence, the idea of being different today is a concept that is being welcomed by majority of people, more precisely the desire to be a relativist attempts to overthrow any absolute idea, which is creating heated debates.

To understand the idea of being different, we shall first define what ethic-cultural relativism is.

Relativism is the concept on which every viewpoint is acceptable and that the individual (society) is the one who believes what is true or relative to him.

“... universally valid criteria do not begin to determine a morality with content sufficiently robust and determinate to guide action. As a consequence, some criteria for adequate moralities will be local to a given society.” (Wong, 2006).

Relativism theorizes the fact that truth is different for different people. While there are relativists in science or mathematics, ethical relativism is the most acceptable version of relativism.

Almost every one of us has heard at least some of the famous relativistic sayings like:

- What is right for you may not be right for me
- What is right for my culture is not necessarily right for your culture

- There is no moral principle that is true to all people in all times, in all countries

All this confirms once again that the theory of ethical relativism does not believe in absolute moral norms.

## 2. Views over Ethical Relativism

An action is morally accepted for a person if his culture believes so, in other words, as a society we decide what actions are moral and what not. And at the moment we decide that, those actions are morally wrong for everyone who is part of the same culture. So in this respect, morality is a subjective point of view, while moral truth depends on what people believe.

In short words we can say that morality is "the taste of a society"

Within a culture there may be subjective beliefs of a person who fails to agree with the general culture of the society he belongs to.

So he adheres to moral rules which are not based either on the rules of its culture or on an objective value. The problem that this subjectivism can cause is the fact that "Hitler can be as moral as Mahatma Gandhi because each one of them acted according to their principles"

"Rather, we could say that the moral framework is determined by values the person would have, were they to rationally revise their views to make them more consistent with each other and the facts." (J. Harman; J. Thomson, 1996). The opposite of this is the objective morality, it does not depend on what people think, and it's not a matter of tasting, because there are actions that are existentially wrong, regardless of what people think. "...certain beliefs often viewed as moral, such as "torture is wrong" are wrong, simply because the moral statement "torture is wrong" (J. Harman; J. Thomson, 1996, p. 102)

For example, "Chocolate is good," it is clearly a subjective truth as long as it is true only for me. "Earth's shape is ellipse" is a real objective because it will be true regardless of what we think.

So the idea about chocolate can be true from both views but the truth about the world is something immutable.

Morality on the other hand is relative also in other contexts.

"The vast majority of people in the developed West claim that cannibalism is wrong. This claim is not obviously true, even if it has some

prima facie plausibility. Indeed, most people further claim that under extreme situation, cannibalism is permissible" (Wisnewski, 2004, p. 265)

Naturally a question arises: Is it normal for some actions to be right or wrong just because society says to be so? In fact, are there objective moral truths?

The third and the most extreme view of the first two is that of ethical nihilism, which believes that morality does not exist as a concept. There is no good or bad, right or wrong. This theory is even known as "denial or negation, of the established and esteemed beliefs and values in morality and religion." (Aloni & Nihilism, 1991, p. 60)

### **3. Relativism on moral issues**

Why should you believe that morality is relative? What relativists advocate is based on these facts:

- Different people have different beliefs on morality
- Consequently, there are no objective facts about morality

Many people collide when it comes to moral issues. Not only hot debates but also civilization wars have evolved over what action is right and wrong.

The above-mentioned testimony from the relativists is unfulfilled and as such cannot be accepted. To be accepted we shall add another argument:

- Different people have different beliefs on morality
- Whenever people disagree over a particular action, then there is no objective fact
- Consequently, there are no objective facts about morality

To illustrate this argument we shall take the example of "Earth's shape is ellipse".

- Different people have different ideas on the shape of the earth, some say it is ellipse and some say it is flat.
- Whenever people disagree over a particular action, then there is no objective fact
- Consequently there is no objective evidence that the ground is round

The idea that there are disagreements over various, mostly moral issues does not prove that objective facts are missing or that everyone thinks right.

Looking at it in more detail, discussions on this aspect of disagreement are numerous. Generally relativists use some actions that practice a culture without hesitation and that for another culture are absolutely wrong to prove that it is normal to have a disagreement over the principles of morality.

One example would be:

Killing babies from the Eskimos: The Eskimos have repeatedly killed newborn babies, for the reason that if they don't, their tribe won't survive. They had limited food to feed only a small number of children. If a mother breastfeeds a baby she will not produce sufficient milk for the second child. "The struggle for existence is so hard, because the experience of generations is that the individual provider is unable to feed more than the most necessary members of the family" (Rasmussen, 1931, p. 139) If many girls were born, the tribe would not have so many boys to provide food for them. So when an infant born threatened survival, they killed him. "For this reason they try to regulate births in order to get as many boys as possible". (Rasmussen, 1931, pp. 139-140) In our culture, this is undoubtedly beyond the norms of morality. At first it seems that there is a great disagreement between us and the Eskimo. But the conditions under which these "murders" have been made must be taken into account. If the Eskimos did not do so, the entire tribe was at risk, so they did not kill babies without reason.

They have acted based on a moral norm: "It's okay to kill if that's going to save other lives." But how acceptable seems to us this principle? Most people accept it. One thing should therefore be emphasized: perhaps there are no disagreements over morality, they are simply different conditions.

#### **4. Four negative impacts of Ethical Relativism**

Like any vital theory of mankind, ethical relativism is a topic of discussion between those who support it and those who oppose it. Some of these objections are:

- Non-contradiction of other culture: If morality would be relative, there is no reason to reject another culture, no matter how wrong it is. If there is a society practicing cannibalism, we

are not given any reason to oppose that action. While our society believes that cannibalism is wrong, so it is. But also, the other society allows the killing and eating of people, seeing it as a moral act. This verdict must not be acceptable. Perhaps it should be said that the people of that culture have a misconception about morality, and that they are doing a morally unfair action and mistakenly believe it to be acceptable?

- Or to be silent when it comes to female genital mutilation only because that society sees it as permissible and that there is no objective fact that would stop it?  
“... Some of the criteria may be universally valid across all kinds of societies because of the very purpose of morality to regulate conflicts of interest. No adequate morality, for example, could allow torture of another person on one’s whim” (Wong, 2006).
- Not opposing the culture where you belong: If ethical relativism is true, no one can criticize the culture to which he belongs. According to relativism, we place morality based on majority vote: whatever the majority says is moral, it has to be taken as true. So if most of us believe that female rape is allowed, such will be. But this cannot be considered acceptable. Morality cannot be decided by majority vote. This means that the possibility of wrongdoing exists in every society.
- Moral growth is impossible: to make progress there must be a change for better. Based on relativism there is no such a thing. So even if our views on morality change in the meantime, beliefs never improve, they just change, because there is no standard in which we can always rely. In the 1800s, enslavement was an act everybody saw as right. But today most of us believe that slavery is morally wrong. If we think that our views on slavery are better than we are wrong. The point of view today is simply different but not the best.
- Immoral actions into moral actions: If ethical relativism is true then one can think of different absurdities. If a large number of people perform a wrong act several times, then that act turns

out to be morally right. If 60% of a society believes that cannibalism is wrong, while 40% is right, then cannibalism is not allowed. However, the possibility for an absurd scenario exists, when the pro-cannibalism kills and eats the rest of the people, it will remain a society that sees cannibalism as morally. So if an act, even wrong, continues to be repeated, it can be taken as a fair move. Any moral theory that allows such absurdities cannot be sustainable.

Those who specifically oppose ethical relativism are human rights defenses, even Shirin Ebadi, founder of the Human Rights Center in Iran, says: "The idea of cultural relativism is nothing more than an excuse for violating human rights"

## **5. Positive impacts of Ethical Relativity**

- Culture is not just moral: opposers of ethical relativism always try to escape the positive sides of it. They do not mention the fact that many things other than morality are related to culture. It is by no means absurd if a society eats the soup with a spoon, while in another society it is eaten by a plate. This is a culture issue but it is not related to morality. There is no moral norm on how to eat soup; this is simply a matter of tastes or personal preference. So it is our duty to distinguish between what is moral and immoral and not mix it with personal preferences.
- Ethnic relativism is based on tolerance: claiming that there is an objective fact on what is moral is not to be intolerant or violent against those who think otherwise. While we talk about moral actions then one must trust that one of them is tolerance. But one thing has to be taken into consideration: when it comes to a country that considers genocide as a cultural custom, we cannot act with such tolerance; there are many other actions where tolerance is the right thing.

## 6. Conclusion

From what we said it seems that ethical relativism is a rather complex problem, given that morality is not subjective.

Rape or murder is not a matter of taste. It cannot be taken as a truth that an act is wrong if a society sees it like that or right because a society suddenly sees as acceptable.

It is obvious that acts such as murder or rape is wrong not only because we see them as wrong but because there are some objective truths about these actions.

In short, some actions are simply mistakenly created, not because someone sees it so.

At the same time, it must be assumed that cultural relativism does not only include issues such as murder, cannibalism, genital mutilation, etc. but culture is a wide spectrum of actions and beliefs that without any problem may be different from culture in culture. As is the moral in most countries eating cow meat, is immoral in India, and it does not bring any objection to objective morality norms.

So we have to be scholars. When we are in the midst of an objective truth and the majority vote, the majority should not be supported.

It is a moral thing to believe that an action is right if it benefits everyone who is affected and an action is wrong if it will hurt the same.

This principle should rightly be acceptable to all people, at all times and in all places no matter what people believe or think.

But surely the relativists will oppose it, and is enough to have a large number of relativists, and this principle will be wrong.

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