Ethics—What Ought We Do?

SECTION 2—A FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGE: RELATIVISM

Although all of us have moral intuitions, many people are very skeptical about whether moral intuitions are uniform enough to provide a solid starting point for the construction of objective ethical theories. There can be no doubt that different people differ in their assessment of the same moral question. Consider, for instance, the Food for Thought exercise that follows.

Food for Thought

Take a look at the following claims, and decide if you agree with it. Write “Agree” or “Disagree” at the end of the claim. Then, answer the question that follows below.

1. Stealing is morally wrong.
2. Adultery is morally wrong.
3. Men and women should receive the same pay if they perform the same work.
4. If a baby is born with only a brain stem (which allows for breathing and heartbeat) and is missing all other major parts of the brain, it is morally permissible for the parents to volunteer the baby as an organ donor.
5. A person who is wealthy but who never gives any money to charity is an immoral person.
6. It is morally permissible to perform sexual activities in exchange for monetary compensation.
7. All members of a society have the right to receive equal educational opportunities.
8. Eating meat is morally wrong.
9. The right to get married should not be restricted to heterosexual couples; same-sex couples should have the right to marry as well.
10. People who have committed a felony in the past should have the right to vote after they are released from prison.
11. No government has the right to kill any of its citizens.
12. A terminally ill person has the right to insist that her doctor put her to death.

Food for Thought (Continued):

13. Now, choose one of the above issues and explain why you believe the way you do.

If you compare your answers to this exercise and the answers that someone else has given, chances are that you will discover significant disagreements. Although most of us probably agree that men and women should receive the same pay if they perform the same work, many people disagree about whether it is immoral to eat meat or whether homosexual partners should have the right to marry. These
disagreements have led some thinkers to suppose that ethics is a subjective affair; the philosophical position that makes this claim is called ethical relativism. An ethical relativist holds that there are no objective moral values (remember that objective in this sense means that the truth is independent of you and me and we can access it in some way). An ethical relativist might say, for example, that the bombing of Hiroshima will appear to American soldiers to be morally good, but to Japanese people it will appear to be morally reprehensible. What the ethical relativist denies is that the bombing of Hiroshima in itself is either morally good or morally bad. According to the relativist, there is no neutral point of view that allows us to judge moral questions objectively.

Whether ethical relativism is true or false has important consequences for the study of ethics. If ethical relativism is correct, it is hard to see how there can be moral knowledge. I might believe, for example, that I am morally required to help homeless people, whereas you might believe that helping homeless people is a waste of money and therefore morally wrong. According to relativism, both of these intuitions can be correct; we cannot establish, from an objective point of view, whether it is true that helping homeless people is morally required. Thus, relativism supports skepticism about the truth value of moral claims. On the other hand, thinkers who believe that we can obtain moral knowledge about ethical questions oppose relativism. Their denial of ethical relativism leads to a position called ethical objectivism, which holds that moral judgments are not dependent on our individual wishes, hopes, or aspirations. According to ethical objectivism, there are some universal moral truths that are true for all people at all times. Thus, the ethical objectivist believes that there are moral facts and that the crucial task of moral theory is to help us clarify what moral facts exist. The chart on the following page introduces some key terms used in the debate between ethical relativism and ethical objectivism.

If we decide that no objective moral values hold for all people at all times, it will be impossible in principle to find a universally satisfactory moral theory. Let us explore therefore whether there are any compelling arguments in support of this position.

ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM

An ethical subjectivist believes that ethical judgments depend on the tastes and preferences of each individual person. According to ethical subjectivism, all moral principles are justified by virtue of their acceptance by an individual agent. If we follow this line of thinking, personal conviction is the ultimate measure of morality. At first blush, this makes a good deal of sense; if we look around us, we can see that each person is unique in his or her preferences and tastes. I might like the music of Joy Division, while you might like the songs of Eminem. I like to play soccer, whereas you might like to play baseball. It would strike most of us as strange if somebody were to claim that she could establish objectively that playing soccer has no value. If I like to play soccer, then soccer has value for me. However, I am happy to grant you the right to say that playing soccer has no value for you. Thus, the value of soccer playing depends on the individual person. The ethical subjectivist argues that something very similar to the soccer debate is true for moral values. According to ethical subjectivism, we cannot establish whether eating meat is, from an objective point of view, morally wrong; it all depends on who makes the judgment. Eating meat might be wrong for me and morally right for you.

There are two main reasons that people are attracted to ethical subjectivism. First, it is compatible with our experiences of living in a pluralistic society. When we look around us, we see many different people with many different moral beliefs. Some people drink alcohol and smoke; others consider smoking and drinking alcohol to be immoral activities. Some of us think that paying taxes is an important moral duty, whereas others feel perfectly fine when they cheat on their income tax returns. Ethical subjectivists can respond to this diversity by saying, “To each his or her own!” They are neither surprised nor annoyed by the fact that people make different moral judgments. According to ethical subjectivists, there are as many moral perspectives as there are different individuals. Second, ethical subjectivism seems very tolerant; its adherents will not try to change your mind about ethical questions. They expect you to do what is right
for you, and they will do what is right for them. No one needs to convince anyone else that a particular moral belief is correct; each person has the right to determine what is morally right for him or her. In light of these considerations, it is no surprise that many people subscribe to ethical subjectivism.

**ARE THERE UNIVERSAL MORAL VALUES?**

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<td><strong>ETHICAL RELATIVISM</strong></td>
<td><strong>ETHICAL OBJECTIVISM</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>An ethical relativist denies that there are any objective moral values.</td>
<td>An ethical objectivist believes that there are objective moral values; that is, at least some ethical norms are true for all people, at all times.</td>
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<td>An ethical subjectivist holds that moral claims have to be assessed in relation to an individual. Rather than saying that eating meat is wrong, one should say, “Eating meat is wrong for me.”</td>
<td>A cultural relativist holds that moral claims have to be assessed in relation to a particular culture. Rather than saying that female circumcision is morally wrong, one should say, “Female circumcision is wrong in the United States.”</td>
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**Problems for Ethical Subjectivism**

There are at least three fundamental problems with ethical subjectivism. First, it is in conflict with some of our most fundamental moral intuitions. Consider, for instance, the events of the Columbine High School shooting on April 20, 1999: Two students, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, walked into their high school and went on a shooting spree. Before they committed suicide, they had killed twelve students and a teacher. If ethical subjectivism is correct, we need to accept the following two statements about these shootings:

1. The actions of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris considered on their own account are neither morally wrong nor morally right.
2. The actions were morally right for Dylan Klebold and for Eric Harris. The shooters felt that they were merely taking revenge for abuse and insults they had suffered in the past.

The emerging problem is obvious. Most of us would reject both statements as preposterous; they are not compatible with our moral intuitions. It appears to us that the actions of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were wrong on their own, not only wrong in relationship to what somebody thinks. To say that the actions of Klebold and Harris were wrong seems to be stating a
moral fact. In addition, it seems absurd to claim that the shootings were right for Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. An action does not become right for somebody just because the action appears justified to that person. Hitler might have felt justified to kill millions of Jews, but that seems to have no bearing on whether his actions were morally justified. What these examples show is that we often have clear and strong intuitions that specific actions are simply wrong, and the ethical subjectivist has no way to account for these moral intuitions.

A second problem is that, according to ethical subjectivism, it is impossible to disagree about ethical questions. Let me illustrate this with the help of an example: Suppose you and Tony are ethical subjectivists and Tony has borrowed twenty dollars from you. After Tony has failed to repay the money, you give him a call. Tony says, “I have changed my mind; I am not going to give you back that money. I have decided that you have too much money anyway.” At this point you might say something like this: “I can’t believe what you are saying. You borrowed twenty dollars, and you promised to pay it back. If you fail to do so, you are committing a moral wrong.” Given that you and Tony are both ethical subjectivists, he might say, “Well, you are mistaken. You think that not paying back the money is morally wrong. However, I believe now that not paying back the money is morally right. Both of us have the right to our opinion, but neither of us has the right to impose an opinion on the other person.”

As this conversation shows, ethical subjectivists cannot have meaningful disagreements and conversations about moral questions. They all have their own opinions about moral matters, and all opinions are equally correct. But this does not square well with our experience of moral conversations. When we disagree about moral questions, we tend to experience the conflict as a specific disagreement about objective subject matter. Genuine ethical conversations are not possible with ethical subjectivism.

The third weakness is closely related to the previous point. If ethical subjectivism is accurate, then our ethical judgments are always correct. If it appears to me that smoking is morally wrong, I am automatically justified in asserting that smoking is wrong for me. According to ethical subjectivism, I cannot go wrong in my ethical judgments, since my ethical judgments are merely the expression of my personal preferences. However, it seems rather strange to assert that we are all ethically infallible. In many situations it makes perfect sense to assert that somebody has a false moral belief. Consider the case of John, who sincerely believes that people who commit adultery should be stoned to death. Most of us probably agree that John is mistaken on this point; stoning does not appear to be an appropriate punishment for any wrongdoing. But if we accept ethical subjectivism, the belief that adulterers should be stoned to death is morally right for John as long as he sincerely believes it. These three arguments show why very few thinkers take ethical subjectivism seriously. Although it appears initially to be attractive, the theory is incompatible with some of our most fundamental moral intuitions and with our experience of meaningful moral conversations. If we want a plausible moral theory, we may need to look somewhere else, perhaps to a more promising version of relativism.
EVALUATION—What do you consider to be the greatest strength and weakness of ethical subjectivism?

Strength:

Weakness:

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativists admit that individual persons can be mistaken about their moral judgments. According to cultural relativism, a given action is morally wrong if the given culture does not approve of it, and an action is morally right if the culture does approve. The culture in the United States, for example, does not approve of stealing. In the United States, therefore, it is morally wrong to steal any property that belongs to somebody else. In Saudi Arabia the culture expects men to have beards. It is therefore morally right for Saudi men to have beards. The overall motto of cultural relativism is this: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do!”

The idea that actions need to be morally evaluated in the context of the culture in which they occur is intuitively plausible, and there are several arguments that support cultural relativism. First, there can be little doubt that the culture in which we grow up has an impact on our moral intuitions. The fact that certain actions receive our approval while others strike us as reprehensible has a lot to do with our childhood and our education. We grow up hearing from our parents that taking the toys of our friends without permission is wrong but that helping an older person cross the street is morally good. Later on, teachers in school reinforce the same lessons. It is therefore plausible that our moral intuitions and feelings are not the result of objective, rational thinking, but rather the product of the culture in which we have been reared.

Second, different cultures endorse different moral and legal practices. In the United States it is perfectly fine for women and men to go to the beach in a small bikini or tight bathing suit. In Scandinavian countries it is acceptable to sunbathe naked, while most Muslim countries require women to cover most of their bodies in public. A cultural relativist is not surprised by these differences; different countries have different customs, and each country determines what is morally right in that country. Cultural relativism is therefore quite compatible with the tremendous variety of differing moral rules that are followed in different countries.
THOUGHT EXPERIMENT: HOW DID YOU LEARN ABOUT MORALITY?

1. How did you arrive at your ideas of morality? What factors played a role in your moral development (family, friends, role models, teachers, books, films)?

2. Imagine that you were born into a different family, in a different region of the world, and in a different culture. Do you think these circumstances would make a difference in your current notions of right or wrong? Explain.

3. In what ways do your moral judgments and values differ from those of your parents? What factors caused your opinions to differ from theirs?

4. To what degree do these reflections support or contradict the claims of cultural relativism?
Third, cultural relativism appears, at first glance, to be a tolerant and peacable position. Suppose, for instance, that moral objectivism is true and that there is only one set of moral rules for all humanity. Suppose further that we discover two different cultures that embrace radically opposed sets of moral values. If moral objectivism is correct, we must conclude that one of these cultures is wrong and that the other is morally superior. Many people might feel uncomfortable drawing such a conclusion. What right do we have to elevate one culture over another? Cultural relativism can solve this dilemma by saying that both cultures are correct as long as they stay within their own spheres. This is a very attractive solution to an otherwise thorny problem. Thus, these three arguments show that cultural relativism is not only an intuitive but also a well-supported philosophical position.

Problems for Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is also open to several major objections. First, many cultural relativists are proud that cultural relativism seems to further cooperation and respect among different cultures because no culture has the right to assert that its cultural practices are superior to those of any other. Closer analysis reveals, however, that cultural relativism does not necessarily advance cooperation among cultures. Consider the case of the Vikings: The Vikings supported themselves for the most part by raiding, burning, and looting monasteries, cities, and farms all over northern Europe. If cultural relativism is correct, we cannot condemn the Vikings; they are simply following their own cultural practices, according to which raiding and plundering other cities is morally praiseworthy. What this example shows is that cultural relativism does not necessarily lead to peaceful cooperation among cultures. It all depends on the cultures that interact; if one of the cultures is aggressive, cultural relativism sanctions war and oppression. Notice also that the losing cultures have no right to complain to the winning, aggressive culture because the more aggressive culture is simply following a different set of moral rules. Many people find this result unsettling; they believe that peaceful cooperation among diverse cultures is an important value. However, it appears that the best way to promote this value is to admit that peaceful cooperation among cultures is a moral value that applies to all cultures at all times. But this is tantamount to embracing a version of ethical objectivism.

Second, cultural relativism cannot explain the influence of moral critics. Consider the example of Martin Luther King, Jr., who grew up in a culture that practiced segregation. The overwhelming majority of his contemporaries believed that it was a good thing to keep the lives of black and white Americans separated. But King became an outspoken and influential critic of this practice, and now we praise him for his courage. We declare with a sense of pride that Martin Luther King, Jr., performed morally good actions when he opposed his own culture and fought for the equality of black and white Americans. Cultural relativists cannot explain this phenomenon easily. If cultural relativism is correct, we have to conclude that King’s actions were morally wrong because he refused to accept what his culture told him was morally necessary. Thus, cultural relativism fails to provide an adequate explanation for the praiseworthy actions of moral critics.

Third, we have seen that cultural relativists support their position by pointing to the great variety of moral codes that can be found across different cultures. They argue that cultural relativism provides the best explanation of why different cultures embrace such different moral norms. Let us call their argument
the **anthropological argument** in defense of cultural relativism. In standard form the argument looks like this:

1. Different cultures live according to very different moral standards.
2. If there were a universal moral standard that held for all cultures, then different cultures would live according to similar moral standards.
3. Therefore: There are no universal moral standards (i.e., ethical objectivism is false).

This argument is an instance of the argument form *modus tollens* and is, therefore, deductively valid. However, it is far from clear whether the premises of the argument are true. Should we accept the second premise? Suppose there are universal moral standards. Why would we expect every culture to accept these standards? It could very well be the case that some cultures *fail* to recognize universal moral truths. The cultural relativist overlooks the possibility that cultures can undergo moral development. For example, there was a time when the majority of Americans accepted slavery as a profitable and acceptable institution. But as time passed, the country realized that it was embracing and supporting a moral evil, and today it is rare to find defenders of slavery. Thus, the country has moved on and changed its moral perspective for the better. If we accept this idea that moral progress is possible, we can see that moral diversity among different cultures is compatible with the existence of objective moral norms. In other words, it is plausible that different cultures recognize and discover objective moral norms in different ways and that eventually, if the development goes on long enough, all cultures might embrace a similar set of moral norms (this might remind some of you of Hegel’s historical relativism). This is, however, a very slow process, and until it is completed, we should not be surprised to find significant cultural and moral diversity among different cultures.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

Most people agree that it is a sign of moral progress that slavery was abolished in the United States. Can you think of other developments in American society that might be considered moral progress? What are some current cultural practices that future generations might consider barbaric and immoral?

**Response to the first question:**

**Response to the second question:**
Another weakness of the anthropological argument for cultural relativism is related to premise 1. Most cultural relativists take it for granted that there are many differences among the moral norms of different cultures. Closer examination seems to reveal, however, that different cultures may be much more similar in their ethical values than the cultural relativist believes (see box to the right). For example, it is quite plausible that all cultures share a certain basic set of core values—such as truth-telling and caring for children. Obviously, no culture can survive for long if it does not cherish certain practices: A culture full of liars is bound to sink into chaos, and a culture that does not care for its children is bound to disappear. Something similar can be said for many other core values: they are essential to the survival of any culture. This suggests that a core set of ethical beliefs may be shared across all cultures.

In addition, certain moral differences among different cultures are caused by non-moral background beliefs and not by differences in moral values. Consider the example of an Inuit tribe that encourages older members to walk away from camp and subsequently freeze to death in the open. At first glance we might suppose that this culture lives according to very different values from those of our own society; it appears that the Inuit culture is cruel and mean to its older members. However, suppose we find out that the Inuit people believe that it is necessary to die with a healthy body in order to have fun in the afterlife. Now, the fact that they encourage older members to die early seems like an act of kindness; they care about their older parents very much and want them to die with healthy bodies. This example shows that cultural differences are often caused not by differences in moral values, but by differences in non-moral beliefs about the world and the afterlife. In other words, the application of the same moral principle may be dependent on the specific conditions of the culture, a notion called action relativism. Thus, cultural relativists may be too quick to conclude that different cultures embrace radically different value systems.
STOP AND THINK

In the suicidal plane attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., in 2001, we have a striking example of a clash of cultural values as well as political ideologies. The terrorists were acting on the basis of what they believed were the mandates of their religion. Although intentionally taking the lives of innocent persons in the name of religious convictions may conflict with our religious or cultural beliefs, this conflict clearly did not exist for the suicidal pilots. In their eyes, they were fighting evil and acting to promote what was good and God’s will. How would a cultural relativist deal with this situation? Would she have to say that it is presumptuous for us to judge the terrorists wrong, because we are only applying our cultural standards to judge their cultural standards (something we should not do)? What alternatives does the ethical relativist have in this sort of situation?

Responses:

Final Remarks on Cultural Relativism

Although full-blown cultural relativism may not lead to a satisfactory ethical position, it would be unwise to dismiss cultural relativism as completely misguided. In some respects, cultural relativism is quite correct. Our upbringing and our cultural training do have a lasting effect on our moral intuitions, and it would be dangerous to assume that our thinking about moral questions is free of cultural bias. Cultural relativism rightly draws our attention to the fact that our moral intuitions are sometimes the result of cultural prejudice and must therefore be scrutinized carefully. Our moral intuitions are trustworthy only if they are in harmony with sound ethical principles.

Moreover, when we study and learn about other cultures, it is often helpful to ignore our own moral perspective and to accept other cultures as they are. As long as we are closely tied to our own cultural and moral perspectives, we tend to be biased observers. Thus, a dose of cultural relativism is often a necessary element in becoming a successful cultural anthropologist or sociologist. However, we can embrace these positive aspects of cultural relativism without accepting that there are no universal and objective moral values.
EVALUATION—What do you consider to be the greatest strength and weakness of cultural relativism?

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