

Ethical Relativism

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Without a single uniform moral code for all human activity at all times, we are left with a morality based on relativity. That morality is, in essence, ethical relativism, and maintains that morality and ethical codes of conduct are relative to the time, the place, and the society for which they are used. Context then becomes the main descriptive factor, as each situation must be considered within the context of its people and its era before any judgments may be rendered. Morality, according to the ethical relativist, is not absolute. Perhaps the greatest problem with ethical relativism is that in its attempt to explain, it also condones.

Walter Terrance Stace, deceased Professor of Philosophy at Princeton, wrote that the position of the ethical relativist is not that any act that might be *thought* wrong in one country might be *thought* acceptable in another country. Rather, he shows that the ethical relativist takes the position to an even stronger stance to say that what *is* right in one country actually *is* wrong in another. The difference is between thinking something *is* right or wrong, and actually *being* right or wrong.

It is clear to see that standards vary over time, as can obviously be observed upon inspection of various cultures in various ages. A local standard is one that people believe to be right at a certain time and in a certain place. So, standards are relative to a time and place, according to the ethical relativist. Anyone arguing against ethical relativism believes that there is a standard that transcends time and place, and this is the basis of ethical absolutism. The ethical absolutist believes that there is a standard that *is* right, not just a standard that people *think* is right. Stace identifies that, "...the variability of moral beliefs is not the same when comparing the two uses of the word standard, as the variability of what really is moral" (Burr and Goldinger 185). His point is that there are two uses of the word standard. It can be used descriptively by

both relativists and absolutists, explaining that customs vary with time, place, and society.

But ethical absolutists believe that the word “standard” can also be used prescriptively in that there is a standard that is an ideal, a higher level that transcends time and place. Standards in the narrower sense of the word are moral ideas that are relative and change over time. But standards in the prescriptive sense of the word are unchanging and absolute.

Ethical relativists not only believe that there is no universal objective standard, or that there is no objective standard at even the local level, but believe that there are not objective standards at all. They believe that all standards are subjective in nature. There is therefore a subjective, not objective, standard in any given society. This standard differs from the subjective standard of any other society. For the relativist, “there are only local, ephemeral, and variable standards” (Burr and Goldinger 186). For the ethical absolutist, however, there is a universal moral standard.

Stace presents the two main arguments for ethical relativity. First of all, there are so many different moral standards around the world over time that a universal standard has not been found, even by anthropologists who have studied people in all cultures and have observed much diversity and variety in moral customs. In fact, it is the belief of ethical relativists that the fact of worldwide variety explains why there is and can be no universal standard. The ethical absolutist’s position on this matter is that various people and cultures around the world are simply ignorant of a universal standard.

Ethical relativists have weighed heavy the arguments of the anthropologists who have observed such worldwide diversity in ethical behavior. Stace noted that while anthropologists have made excellent and useful observations within the scope of their own specialization, they have added nothing useful, in principle, to the problems of moral philosophers. Stace added that

we already know that moral ideas vary over time and we therefore don't need to look to anthropologists for answers.

The second main argument for ethical relativity is that a religious basis for a moral standard isn't really appropriate in this case. Ethical relativists argue that there is no moral foundation or authoritative source on which to have an absolute standard. "An obligation implies some authority which it obliges" (Burr and Goldinger 188). Who or what is the authority? It could be argued that the basis is on the commands of God, but that doesn't help us proceed any further since only theists would concur. There are three types of objections for a religious basis for morality (Nagel 62). First of all, atheists still make judgments of right and wrong. Secondly, an action (e.g., burglary) should be able to be considered wrong in and of itself without direction from a higher authority. Thirdly, fear of punishment and hope of reward from God shouldn't be the only reasons to do right; doing right benefits society as a whole.

Stace believed that it was important to find a basis of morality independent of religious dogmas. He wrote "...it is idle to talk about a universal morality unless we can point to the source of its authority" (Burr and Goldinger 188). Blind faith may be enough for the average individual, or the religious-minded, but the philosopher needs more.

So without a religious basis, can a secular basis be found? If not, then the ethical relativists maintain that the ethical absolutists have no lasting argument for their position. But Stace points out that there is a weakness in the argument of the relativist that makes their argument pregnable, and that is that it is virtually impossible to prove a negative proposition. So the relativists' proposition that "there is no theory that can provide a basis for a universal morality" is unprovable. For example, we can't prove that a pink elephant doesn't exist; we simply have not found one. Yet it is theoretically possible, unlike a square circle which is

theoretically impossible.

Stace makes two cogent arguments for ethical absolutism. The first is based on the notion of different principles and ideals among cultures and groups. If relativity is believed in its purest sense, it destroys the idea of morality altogether. If everything is relative, then anything can be acceptable given a particular time and place. It ultimately keeps people from trying to make a better world because they know that any criminal action can always be justified at some level, even at a low ideological level. It makes the discussion of moral worth useless because a time with slavery can be shown to be of no lower an ideological value than a time when the rights of all humans are respected. The ethical relativist would say that Christian ideals apply only to Christians, Islamic ideals apply only to Muslims, and so on.

The comparison of different peoples is similar in its relativistic approach as are comparisons of different eras (e.g., slavery was acceptable at one time). The second argument for ethical absolutism is in the progression of morality over time. Symbolically, the Holy Bible is representative of improvement in terms of comparing the Old Testament with the New Testament. In the Old Testament, there were many problems and struggles. There is hope and subsequent redemption in the New Testament. As a society, we progress from lesser to greater in ways described both individually and collectively. We are more knowledgeable than we were as a society a century ago. Just as the individual improves in the building of knowledge as they age, so does society improve its collective knowledge over time. Consider how advances in science have allowed us to improve our life spans. But with ethical relativism, even individuals within a society can't be compared. The morality of a minister is therefore no better than that of a reprobate, because relativism can be taken down to the individual level. A man who helps an elderly lady walk up a flight of stairs is not morally better than one who would take her purse

and run with it, because the miscreant is a part of a group whose lower morality must be respected, relatively. If wisdom is another quality we improve upon, then we should also be able to be described as improving in that area with regards to morality. But the relativists don't seem to think we have improved in that area; our morality is no better today than it was in prior eras.

While Stace makes a convincing case against ethical relativism, he doesn't proffer any indication of what the ultimate moral standard should be. But he doesn't need to. Society will be better off if it is believed that there is some prescriptive standard. Should that standard therefore be based on the ideas of majority belief? If majority rule is accepted, and the majority is mistaken or morally way off track, then there could and would be disastrous results. Also, an off-track majority rule would reject an enlightened individual like Jesus, because his beliefs would seem contrary and therefore threatening to the majority of the group.

Should therefore the beliefs of a wise minority be used instead to set a standard? The position of a minority is not always acceptable either. The wisest individual in the group, for example, a shaman of a Native American tribe, might be delusional and do more harm than good when suggestions to the tribe include disharmonious actions.

The standard we should apply should always be the highest and best we know of at any given time. Philosophers have presented a few different theories concerning the best possible ultimate principle. Three of the most prominent views are egoism, utilitarianism, and formalism. Egoism is the belief that the only pragmatic standard of conduct is based on the interests of the individual. Utilitarianism is the view that the actions are most appropriate when they result in the greatest benefit for all concerned. Formalism is the view that right acts should be done because doing so is right in and of itself. The Golden Rule, that of "treat others as you would like to be treated," is a formalist view in that it values proper behavior regardless of final outcomes.

Consider also the Platinum Rule, which is “treat others as they would like to be treated.” The Platinum Rule isn’t necessarily any higher in idealism than the Golden Rule, because, for example, if we consider the feelings of others all the time, a captured burglar would be let go from jail because it is his wish to be treated that way. Perhaps a suitable answer for a fair prescriptive standard would have two-parts, and would begin from the perspective of the individual. Use the Golden Rule as a starting point for the standard. Then consider the Platinum Rule, and choose the course of action that would have the most beneficial effect for everyone concerned. At a broader level it could be expanded to include all sentient life. At an even broader level, it would include respect for all life.

It is understandable that ethical relativity can be very attractive. It allows for more freedoms, especially from the mindset of nonintegrated individuals. Belief in a prescriptive standard, albeit one that may be unknown to many, is still belief in something higher, and pragmatically better for all.

Works Cited

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