

Relativism

James Rachels, “Cultural Relativism”

Many Different Moral Codes

- Moral codes, or ethical values and principles vary across cultures
 - Callatians ate the bodies of their dead fathers. The Greeks practiced cremation and did not eat the dead.
 - Spartans practiced infanticide. In our own society, infanticide is wrong.
 - Pedophilia practiced in Ancient Greece; Wrong in our society.
 - For Eskimos, polygamy is accepted; wrong in most Christian societies

Objective Truth

- Some uncontroversial examples of objective truths
 - There is a projector in this room.
 - Water is made of Hydrogen and Oxygen.
 - $2 + 2 = 4$
- The truth of these claims **does not** depend on anyone's preferences, wishes or views. Their truth depends on what the world is like **independently of us.**
- Are moral claims objective truths? Cultural Relativism says No!

Cultural Relativism

○ Rachels gives six theses that motivates cultural relativism

2. There is **no objective standard** that can be used to judge one societal code better than another.

3. The moral code of our own society has **no special status**; it is merely one among many.

Cultural Differences Argument

Argument Against Objective Truth of Burial Rights

1. Greeks believed it wrong to eat the dead; Callatians believed it right
2. Therefore, eating the dead is neither **objectively** right nor **objectively** wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

General Argument Against Objective

1. Cultures have different moral codes
2. So, there is no objective truth in morality

Does the Argument Follow?

Consider a similar argument:

1. In some societies, people believe the earth is flat, and in other societies, people believe the earth is spherical
 2. Therefore, there is no objective truth about whether the earth is flat or not.
- But, clearly 2 does not follow from 1:
 - “in their beliefs about the world, the members of some societies might simply be wrong. There is no reason to think that if the world is round everyone must know it. Similarly, there is no reason to think that if there is moral truth everyone must know it. [The argument] attempts to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject from the mere fact that people disagree about it.”

Cultural Relativism

- Some common phrase that suggest some form of relativism
 - “it’s all relative”
 - “to each his own”
 - “we create our values or morals”
 - Who are you to say what is right *for me*?
 - “That is good for you but not for me”

Definition of Morality

- **Cultural Relativism:**

- an action A is **morally right** in culture C =(by def) A is approved by the people of C
 - an action A is **morally wrong** in culture C =(by def) it is disapproved by people of C
- Infanticide is approved by Spartans, so it is morally right in Sparta
 - Infanticide is disapproved in U.S., so it is morally wrong in U.S.

Objection 1: Which Group?

- What group do we belong to? How does one define culture?
 - There are many options:
 - Country
 - Race
 - Ethnicity
 - University
 - Union
 - Company
- Moral codes in each of these groups are often in conflict
 - **My Union:** go on a strike
 - **My Employer:** Don't go on a strike
 - So, what should I do?
- It looks like any way to decide which of these is better would

Objection 2: Repugnant Views

- If Cultural Relativism is true, then **any view at all** that the culture approves of becomes morally right. But, there are morally repugnant views that surely are morally wrong even if universally approved of in a culture
- Examples
 - Genghis Khan conquest (mass murder on extreme scale)
 - Mistreatment and murder of Jews (Nazi Fascism)
 - Slavery

Objection 3: Moral Deliberation

- Moral decision would be too easy if Cultural Relativism were true
- All one would have to do is compare one's actions with one's culture. If they matched then one's action would be right, if it didn't it would be wrong
- But, this doesn't account for the fact that many people deliberate at length about what they should do

Objection 4: Progress Impossible

- There is no reason why one would want to change society
- It makes no sense to say that my society would be better if they didn't approve of slavery; there is no objective fact that can guide moral progress
- So, most moral heroes that we have are not really heroes at all; they were wasting their time wanting society to change from, say, approving of slavery to disapproving of it.
 - Martin Luther King, Gandhi were, on this view, wasting their time.
 - Our societies are not better now than they were in the 50s; racism existed back then, now less so, but racism was right for the times, and not it is not.
- On the other hand, objective ethics can make sense of moral progress. Slavery is a bad thing, we want society changed that has slavery. So, a moral society is improved by

Less Disagreement than It Seems

- If these objections are convincing, what do we make of the initial observation that there are many different moral codes?
- Many different moral codes which are common to all societies
 - Societies must protect their children; otherwise there would not be a society
 - Society must not allow rampant war; otherwise the society will be destroyed
- Many values only appear to be different
 - Callatians, who eat dead fathers, eat them as a sign of respect or honor: a symbolic act that says that 'the spirit dwell's within us';
 - The practices are foreign, but the values are familiar. So, the societies agree on what underlying values are [namely honour, respect the dead, especially your family]
 - So, there is less disagreement than it initially appears

Lessons

- If Cultural Relativism is false then we need a different view of morality
- A view that allows for basic moral truths
 - The Holocaust is wrong
 - Moral progress is possible; Civil rights movement made society better
- **Next few lectures on Ethics:** Different Objective Moral Theories
- **Objective Ethics**
 - there is an objective matter of fact as to what is right/wrong
 - Moral beliefs are true or false
 - If you do not believe the objective morals, your beliefs are false