

Relativism

James Rachels, "Cultural Relativism"

Many Different Moral Codes

- 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 facts / truth
 - There is a projector in this room.
 - Water is made of Hydrogen and Oxygen.
 - $2 + 2 = 4$
- Whether or not these claims are true or false, they **do not** depend on anyone's preferences, wishes or views. The truth of these claims depends on what the world is like **independently of us**.
- Are moral claims objective truths? Relativism says No!

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; A is **morally wrong** in C just in case 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 is the group that we belong to? How do you define culture?
 - 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?

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 believed in a culture
- **Examples**
 - Universal approval for Genghis Khan conquest (mass murder on extreme scale)
 - (Near) Universal approval of Slavery
 - Approval of mistreatment and murder of Jews (Nazi Fascism)

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 moral beliefs with one's culture. If it matched then it would be right, if it didn't it would be wrong
- But, this doesn't account for the fact that some, perhaps many, people deliberate at length about complex moral issues, e.g. abortion, famine relief

Objection 4: Progress Impossible

- Since moral values are arbitrary, there cannot be anything wrong about any set of values that a society has, as long as there is approval within the society
- There is no reason why one would want to change society for the better
 - MLK could not have said that an equal American society would be better
 - We could not say that our society is better now than it was in the 50s.
 - Moral progress or regress does not make any sense, because there are no objective facts; there are only preferences which change over time.

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? The premise appears to be true but it is not.
- 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’
- Practices are foreign, but the values are familiar. So, the societies agree on what underlying values are, and so there isn’t as much disagreement
- Some values societies couldn’t exist without: i) protection of young; ii) Prohibition against free killing; iii) Lying

Lessons

- 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

Tolerance and Objective Ethics

- If we cultural relativism is rejected AND we accept objective ethics THEN do we become intolerant?