Moral Relativism Explained

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1 What Is Moral Relativism?

According to moral relativism, there is not a single true morality. There are a variety of possible moralities or moral frames of reference, and whether something is morally right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, etc. is a relative matter—relative to one or another morality or moral frame of reference. Something can be morally right relative to one moral frame of reference and morally wrong relative to another.[1] It is useful to compare moral relativism to other kinds of relativism. One possible comparison is with motion relativism.[2] There is no such thing as absolute motion or absolute rest. Whether something is moving or at rest is relative to a spatio-temporal frame of reference. Something may be at rest in one such frame of reference and moving in another. There is no such thing as absolute motion and absolute rest, but we can make do with relative motion and rest. Similarly, moral relativism is the view that, although there is no such thing as absolute right and wrong, we can make do with relative right and wrong.

Paul Boghossian suggests a different comparison.[3] When people decided that there were no witches and no such thing as witchcraft, they did not become relativists about witches; they gave up their beliefs about witches. It would have been a mistake for them to conclude that witchcraft is a relative matter, so that someone could be a witch in relation to one witch framework but not in relation to another. An individual might be *believed* to be a witch by

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[1] I believe that this type of relativism is different from the very interesting type discussed by Carol Rovane, e.g. in "Relativism Requires Alternatives, Not Disagreement or Relative Truth."

[2] Gilbert Harman: "Moral Relativism," pp. 3-5.

[3] E.g., Paul Boghossian, "The Maze of Moral Relativism."

someone else, but that is not to say the individual *is* a witch relative to the other person's opinion. In contrast, whether something is moving or not is relative to a spatio-temporal framework, not to anyone's opinion about whether it is moving.

Boghossian suggests that a morality is constituted by opinions about moral right and wrong, so moral relativism is like witch relativism. He concludes that the proper response to the thought that there is not a single true morality is to stop believing in moral right and wrong. The proper response is moral nihilism not moral relativism.

But that response is too quick. There are other more relevant comparisons, with what we might call *football relativism*, *legal relativism*, and *linguistic relativism*.

Football relativism is the sensible idea that there are different actual and possible versions of football with different rules; whether something deserves a penalty is relative to which version of football is being played. Legal relativism is the view that whether something is legal is relative to a legal system and there are different actual and possible legal systems. Linguistic relativism is the obviously correct view that the (linguistic) meaning, if any, of a certain sequence of sounds is relative to a language. (Davidson famously illustrates the point with the observation that the sentence "Empedocles leaped" does not mean in English what the similar sounding sentence "Empedokles liebt" means in German.[4])

These comparisons are more illuminating than Boghossian's comparison with witch relativism. The proper response to the discovery that there are different languages, different legal systems, and different versions of football is not to deny that that there are any linguistic principles, legal regulations, or rules of football.

2 Having a Morality

Different groups of people may play different versions of football. Different societies may have different legal systems. Different people speak different languages. And different people may have different moralities. Moralities accepted at one time may fail to be accepted at another

[4] Donald Davidson: "On Saying That," p. 163.

time. Individuals within any given group may have different moralities. A particular person may accept different mutually incompatible moralities at different times and even at the same time.

What is it for a group or an individual to have a particular morality? In some ways it is like having a particular language with a particular syntax and vocabulary. Your morality is reflected in and explains something about the way you act and about the ways you react to the actions of others. You may have a morality in this way without being able to give anything like a precise specification of the principles of that morality, just as you are not able to give a precise specification of the grammar of your language. You may accept some aspects of a morality as a member of a group ("our principles"), you may accept some aspects simply for yourself ("my principles"), and you may accept some aspects simply as what's right.

Moral relativism finds that there is no objective way to establish that a particular morality is the correct morality one and concludes that there is no reason to believe in a single true morality. This is compatible with the possibility of certain *moral universals* just as there seem to be linguistic universals. I will come back to this point later.

3 Ways in Which Actual Moralities Differ

In trying to think about moral relativism, it is useful to keep in mind the many differences in the moralities that people accept and live by. Moralities differ in what they imply about abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, religion, etiquette, slavery, caste systems, cannibalism, eating meat, what sorts of experiments on animals are permitted, and what sorts of experiments on human beings are permitted. They may differ concerning the relative importance of chastity in men and women, how many wives or husbands people can have, homosexuality, incest, and whether people in their twenties have special obligations toward their parents. They differ about whether there is an obligation not to lie to strangers and whether there is an obligation to help strangers who need help. They differ concerning the relative importance of equality versus liberty, who gets what, preserving natural beauty, and the acceptability of littering.

Differences in moralities among people I know include differences about vegetarianism, wearing leather, extreme utilitarianism, extreme egoism, what counts as plagiarism and whether plagiarism is wrong. There are also the moralities of those in certain gangs or "organized crime."

It is hard to believe that we all have the same morality at bottom.

Compare with the question whether we all have the same religion at bottom. Someone I know was once asked by an immigration officer to specify his religion. He replied that he was an atheist. The immigration officer replied, "I haven't heard of that one, but I guess we all worship the same god, don't we?"

Do we all have the same legal system at bottom? Natural Law theorists may argue that we do in that the basic legal system is the same. To be sure there are various local regulations concerned with details and specific circumstances. In this view, "laws" that violate the principles of natural law are not really valid. There can still be conflicts, however. For example, if two legal systems claim sovereignty over the same territory, whether a particular couple is married might be answered differently in the two systems. So, there is still the possibility of legal relativity even in a natural law framework.

We might ask whether we all have the same language at bottom. Chomsky argues that there is a universal grammar that applies to all languages that children learn without instruction; there are merely "superficial" differences of vocabulary and word order.[5] But surely this isn't really to say we all have the same language. (I will come back to this.)

4 What Are Moralities?

4.1 Comparison with Languages

To believe in moral relativism is to believe there is more than one possible morality. But what is a morality? And what is it to have a morality? One way to answer these questions resembles David Lewis' discussion of parallel questions about language. Lewis identifies a language with

[5] Noam Chomsky: *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind*.

an abstract assignment of meanings (connected with truth conditions) to linguistic expressions and he identifies having that language with participating in a convention of truthfulness and trust with respect to that assignment.[6] Similarly, an explanation of what a morality is might have two parts: One part identifying a morality with certain moral principles, the other saying what it is for people to have a morality with those principles. There are several kinds of moral principles: requirements and permissions about what has to be done and what may be done, rankings of various things as better or worse, and specifications of morally virtuous or vicious actions and character traits.

For a group to have a morality with such principles involves members of the group being motivated to adhere to the requirements, to rank things in accord with ranking principles of the morality, to assess actions and character traits as specified in the morality, to develop virtues and avoid vices, to bring up children appropriately, etc.

4.2 Comparison with Games

Moralities can also be compared with games that are at least in part defined by their rules: football, baseball, soccer, golf, chess, bridge, solitaire. Often there are several versions of a game with minor differences in their rules. The rules of professional baseball change over time and differ in certain respects from the rules of other versions of school baseball, just as your language, your idiolect, may differ from mine in various respects: vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, or semantics.

Some aspects of the rules of a game or a morality might be describable propositionally, but participants will not be able to provide full and complete descriptions. Roughly speaking, to be engaged in a particular game or morality is to be disposed or committed to acting in certain ways. (Of course, such dispositions or commitments may be overridden by other considerations in certain circumstances.)

[6] David Lewis: "Languages and Language."

7 Why Believe There Is Not a Single True Morality?

The main reason to believe there is not a single true morality is that there are major differences in the moralities that people accept and these differences do not seem to rest of actual differences in situation or disagreements about the facts.

It is hard for me to believe that all disagreements rest on different opinions about the facts or confusions of one or another sort—disagreements about abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, vegetarianism, homosexuality, egoism, and utilitarianism. Differences in attitude and practice about these issues occur among people within the same larger society. There appears to me to be no objective way of settling these disagreements. That yields an argument for moral relativism that is similar for arguments for relativism about rest and motion, football, law, and language. However, I doubt that such an argument will be persuasive for anyone who is not already a moral relativist.

8 Final Remarks

8.1 Moral Relativism is not a linguistic or conceptual thesis

This sort of moral relativism is not the thesis that there is a hidden parameter in the syntactic or semantic structure of a moral judgment that picks out one or another morality framework.

It is also not the thesis that ordinary moral judgments are false or lack a truth value.

The relation between truth conditions and syntactic or semantic structure is not straightforward.

Compare moral relativism again to motion relativism. We often take ordinary judgments about motion to be true if they are true in relation to a framework salient to the judger even if the judger is unaware of motion relativism.

In the dispute between Galileo and Bellarmine as to whether the earth moves, the dispute seems explicitly to presuppose that there is such a thing as absolute motion and rest and to concern whether the earth is absolutely at rest. So, in that particular case we might count them both wrong because of this false presupposition. Or we might count Galileo as right because we see him as "more right" than Bellarmine.

8.2 How might moral relativists assess the moral judgments of those who are not moral relativists

Moral relativists might take the judgments to be true if they are true in relation to a salient moral framework.

If the judgment in question explicitly presupposes that there is a single true morality, moral relativists might count it wrong because of its false presupposition (in a way parallel to the Galileo/Bellarmine case). In any event, moral relativism is not directly about this issue. Moral relativism denies that there is a single true morality.

Moral relativism asserts that there are facts about what is right or wrong in relation to one or another moral framework This should be uncontroversial!

Moral relativism denies that there are nonrelational facts about what is right or wrong, although there might be certain universal facts about moralities of a certain sort in the way there are linguistic universals. What to say about ordinary moral judgments is a further issue.

8.3 Some mistakes about moral relativism

"Moral relativism implies that ordinary moral judgments are all mistaken."

Response: moral relativism is not a theory about the content of such judgments. Similarly, the relativity of motion or mass or simultaneity does not entail that ordinary judgments about these topics are mistaken.

"Moral relativism implies that people are mistaken about the truth conditions of their moral judgments."

Response: this objection rests on an incorrect view about language and truth conditions Again, compare the dispute between Bellarmine and Galileo.

"If moral judgments are relative to moralities that consist in propositions about what one ought to do or not do, and those propositions are nonrelative, then to accept such a morality is to accept nonrelative moral propositions But if those propositions are relative, there is a vicious circularity In any event, we get a position that conflicts with ordinary thought"

Response: moralities do not consist in such propositions.

"Moral relativism is not a version of moral realism."

Response: moral relativism supposes that the relevant relations are real. In that respect it is a version of moral realism.

"Why not reject morality?"

Response: One can reject the idea that there is a single true morality, yet still have or participate in a morality (or moralities).

8.4 How can there be a moral disagreement among moral relativists who accept different moralities?

Consider two moral relativists. They both agree that *D* is right in relation to moral framework *M* but wrong in relation to moral framework *N*. One accepts morality *M*, the other

accepts morality *N*. They may say that they disagree about whether *D* is right. But they may also be clear that their disagreement does not consist in any disagreement about what's true.

Presumably they disagree in attitude. One is morally in favor of *D*, the other is morally opposed to *D*. But that is not to say that suppose that some sort of non-cognitive analysis is appropriate for ordinary moral judgments, any more than it is appropriate for understanding the rules of football, laws in a legal system, or principles of the grammar of a language.

To repeat: Moral relativism is the theory that there is not a single true morality. It is not a theory of what people mean by their moral judgments.

9. Conclusion

I do not pretend to have provided support for moral relativism that would convince someone who is not already a moral relativist. I have only tried to explain the view and show how someone who accepts it would respond to various objections.

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