

Philosophy 104, Business Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2007  
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Lecture Notes, March 13

## I. Benedict, Ethical Relativism

We have been discussing three options for the possibility of morality.

A 'morality' is a set of true claims about right and wrong.

Moral nihilism is the claim that there is no morality.

Moral absolutism is the claim that there is one morality.

Moral relativism is the claim that there are different moralities.

These three claims are all prescriptive, rather than descriptive.

Of course, there are many different codes of behavior that people actually follow.

The question is whether there is one correct code of behavior.

Universality of customs can mislead us into thinking that our norms are the correct ones.

But, when we study isolated tribes, we can find significant departures from modern ethical norms.

What we think of as abnormal may be taken as normal.

Further, Benedict argues, "The concept of normal is properly a variant of the concept of the good." (36-7)

Since the normal varies, she thinks, the moral also varies.

Benedict provides a variety of interesting descriptions of the variance of normality.

The berdache, or two-spirit, are American Indian homosexuals, born one gender, but playing the social role of the other.

Some societies condemn homosexuality, but the berdache are seen as normal.

Similarly, the Melanesian Dobu see paranoia as normal, whereas we see it as aberrant.

Although, Benedict's claims about the Dobu may be inaccurate.

See <http://www.nancysullivan.org/article-theirresistablecharmsofdohuisland.htm>

The Kwakiutl respect revenge killing, even if the victims were unconnected to the original murder, p 55.

The examples suffice to establish the claim that what people see as normal vary with the society.

This descriptive claim may be obscured by the homogenization of culture in our connected world.

## II. Do Benedict's examples support her claim that morality is relative?

Consider the berdache, which is an excellent example of how some people may elevate their preferences to the level of morality.

Some people surely think homosexuality is immoral.

But, this does not make sexual preference a moral issue.

I can deride the eating of Brussels sprouts as immoral, too.

The berdache only show that customs or mores are relative.

They do not show that morality itself is relative.

Certainly, there are different practices in different societies.

We can even admit that a person who violates a social code may be judged as immoral, without accepting that morality itself is relative.

Consider a society that thinks that sex on Tuesdays is immoral, and consider a couple who have sex on

Tuesday in that society.  
They will be seen as immoral.  
We can describe how they will be shunned and derided.  
But, we do not see them as immoral for having sex on Tuesday.  
We can see them as having violated a norm.  
Maybe they brought shame to their parents, and that makes them wrong.  
But sex on Tuesday itself is not a wrong.

Benedict has successfully argued that normality is socially relative.  
She has also established that what people think is moral is socially relative.  
And this is what Darius showed us, as well.

Pojman provides a way of understanding Benedict's examples, and others, without accepting relativism.  
Consider the example of head-covering among Jews and Christians in places of worship.  
The Jew need not think the Christian is irreverent for uncovering his or her head.  
He can just see the Christian as having a different manifestation of the universal imperative for reverence.  
The Jew can even think that the Christian has the wrong idea of what reverence is, without seeing him as irreverent.

Similarly, the Kwakiutl's desire for revenge need not be seen as evidence of relative morality.  
There are easy explanations why some one would be afraid not to seek vengeance.  
And fears and self-interest are good motivators for violating moral codes.  
Benedict focuses on the lack of remorse, the good feelings among the Chief's party when he returned from the killing.  
He had just returned from a justifiable homicide, according to his culture.  
We need not see the homicide as justifiable, but we can understand how he would.

The importance of relativism arises in business ethics in large part because of issues involving bribery.  
Some societies accept or condone bribery.  
U.S. laws forbidding bribery and kickbacks put U.S. companies at a competitive disadvantage in international business.  
The relativist says that such laws unjustifiably extend our morality to other cultures.

Benedict provided examples of norms which varied with the society.  
She certainly succeeds in arguing that the normal varies with the culture.  
This is easily granted without accepting ethical relativism.  
Ethical relativism says that morality also varies with the culture.  
Benedict's arguments for ethical relativism seem poor.  
We must distinguish the normative from the descriptive in terms of ethics.  
People do have different customs, but that does not mean that they should.

Benedict's error seems to be in claiming, "The concept of normal is properly a variant of the concept of the good." (36-7)  
And she really does not have an argument for that claim.  
The key paragraph is at the end of p 36, but it is really unsupported.

### III. Two kinds of intersubjective agreement

Pojman examines an argument, from John Ladd, for ethical relativism, which is Benedict's argument as well.

1. Diversity Thesis: What is considered moral varies with the society, so there are no universally accepted moral standards.
2. Dependency Thesis: The morality of a person's action depends on his/her society. So, there are no objective moral standards.

The objectivist/absolutist may argue that we can find moral standards in intersubjective agreement. That is, since every one agrees that murder is wrong, murder is wrong. Benedict rejects this argument from intersubjectivity to objectivity, by denying that there are any kinds of universal intersubjective agreement. Standards, she says, are in fact different in different places.

In response, Pojman mentions that there are two different kinds of situations of intersubjective agreement, p 50.

The first kind, the accidental, vary with the culture.

That is, while every one in a particular group may agree that taking drugs is better than going to school, members of different groups may prefer going to school to taking drugs.

The relativist thinks that all intersubjective agreement is accidental, and so can not be the foundation of objective (or absolute) moral principles.

Pojman argues that some intersubjective agreement is essential, rather than accidental.

Not only do all humans in a particular group prefer pleasure to pain, all humans every where do.

Objective ethical principles may be based on essential intersubjective agreements, not accidental ones.

The diversity thesis is the descriptive claim that Benedict established.

Still, we must distinguish descriptive claims, about what people do, from prescriptive claims, about what people ought to do.

That the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice is no argument for the moral acceptability of human sacrifice.

The dependency thesis is a normative claim.