

Philosophy 104, Business Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2007

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Lecture Notes, March 16

I. The diversity and dependence theses

On Tuesday, we looked at Pojman's representation of an argument, from John Ladd, for ethical relativism:

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.

We saw that the diversity thesis is a descriptive claim, while the dependency thesis is a normative claim.

There is a weak version of the dependency thesis, which can be understood by considering the examples, which we saw last week, of whether one covers one's head in a place of worship.

The Jew covers his head, the Christian takes off his hat.

It looks as if the right thing to do depends on which culture, which religion, one belongs to.

But people in both religions are expressing a more fundamental prescription for reverence.

The weak dependency thesis says that while the acceptability of specific acts varies with the society, these may be expressions of universal underlying principles.

Covering one's head in a place of worship is a theological issue, not necessarily a moral one.

The same weak dependency thesis applies in ethical cases.

Consider eye contact, or shaking hands, or whether one finishes the food on one's plate when a guest in another's house.

In some homes, the host will feel ashamed (or insulted) that there was not enough food.

In others, the host will be pleased that the guest enjoyed the meal so much.

The specific prescription varies with the culture.

But, the general prescription, that the guest should not insult his host, is universal.

There is an underlying moral prescription which is instantiated differently depending on the family.

Pojman also mentions a dietary analogy.

Every one needs the same vitamins, protein, etc.

These core bodily needs are universal, or objective.

But we can get our dietary requirements in different ways.

Some people eat meat, some people eat tofu.

Analogously, the core objective values may be universal, even if their instantiations are culturally relative.

The absolutist and the objectivist can accept the weak dependency thesis, without subscribing to ethical relativism.

The relativist demands a stronger thesis, that all morality is conventional.

II. Some brief definitions of terms as Pojman uses them:

Cultural relativism: the empirical (descriptive) claim that different cultures have different codes of behavior.

Ethical relativism: the normative (prescriptive) claim that there are different, and equally defensible, standards for behavior.

Subjectivism: there are as many different and equally defensible standards for behavior as there are people. Every person makes his or her own standard.

Solipsism: isolated individuals develop their own moral code.

Moral realism: moral values are independent of human beings, and human nature.

Absolutism: There is one valid universal set of moral principles.

Objectivism: There are universal ethical standards.

Pojman thinks that the objectivist can deny absolutism, but I do not think that he is right.

Objectivism just seems to be putting a nice face on absolutism.

Pojman also argues that relativism collapses into subjectivism, which leads to solipsism.

Relativism leads to subjectivism because it is not clear how big a society needs to be in order for it to have a moral code.

And solipsism seems to be just another term for subjectivism.

I will not follow Pojman in distinguishing objectivism from absolutism.

And, I will not worry about solipsism/subjectivism.

Pojman neglects altogether nihilism.

So, really, we are contrasting the relativist/conventionalist with the objectivist/absolutist.

III. Three reasons one might favor ethical relativism:

1) Freedom: everyone does decide for themselves how to act.

Freedom could be misinterpreted as an argument for relativism.

In fact, it has nothing to do with morality, which is normative.

Freedom is a merely descriptive claim.

You can in fact choose how to act.

But you might choose to act in an immoral way.

2) We learn ethics from those around us, from society.

This is Benedict's argument, and we saw that there were problems with it.

Still, society and family act as support for difficult moral decisions.

Many moral theorists assume that our moral requirements can not be more demanding than we can meet.

If we are morally required to perform an act, we must be able to actually perform it.

If an act is impossible, then it can not be morally required.

This is roughly equivalent to the claim that morality is possible.

For, if an act were impossible but morally required, then there would be no way for me to be moral.

For instance, if I were morally required to end the war in Iraq myself, then there would be no way for me to behave morally.

We sometimes summarize this position as, "Ought implies can."

It is difficult to act in opposition to one's culture and family.
If it were impossible to do so, and if ought implies can, then morality could only be relative to a culture.

Nevertheless, the argument that morality is relative because we learn how to behave from those around us, and different people have different surroundings commits the fallacy of deducing a normative claim from a factual one.

From the fact that there are different social codes in different societies, and that different people believe that different actions are right and wrong, one may not infer that there are different moral codes.

Another way to see the problem with Benedict's argument is to notice that it commits the genetic fallacy of confusing the origins of one's beliefs with their justification.

I may learn mathematics from my math teachers, but the teachers do not determine which mathematics facts are true.

3) Relativism seems to be a respectful attitude toward other cultures, and we want to be respectful.

Still, we can maintain respect without lapsing into relativism.

Understanding of other cultures is necessary, and possible, if a little bit of hard work.

This understanding allows us to both praise and criticize other cultures.

We want to be relativists to avoid hypocrisy and judgmentalism.

We can show respect, instead, by not passing crude, untutored judgments.

In fact, in defending relativism on the basis of respect, we lapse into applying our own standards.

The only way we can defend relativism is to abandon it.

Similarly, we can explain the social differences in morality without appeal to relativism.

We appeal to factors like utility, expectations, responsibility, fairness, rights.

These may be seen as universal.

In every society, we have responsibilities, and must meet them.

The specifics of our duties vary, but not that we must fulfill such duties as exist.

IV. Five problems with ethical relativism, from Pojman

We have dismissed some reasons to favor ethical relativism.

Now, we will examine some problems with relativism.

1. The self-defeating nature of relativism and Herskovits, p 42.

We are told that relativism is best because it shows tolerance for other cultures.

But tolerance itself is a value.

If relativism is best because it is tolerant, then we seem to have an absolute value of tolerance, which undermines the relativism it is supposed to support.

This is an important philosophical problem with all kinds of relativism.

E.g. relativism about truth.

Is the claim that all truth is relative itself an absolute truth?

Consider: "All moral claims are relative."

This is a moral claim.

So, is it relative?

If it is not, then at least one truth is not relative, and so perhaps there are others.

If it is, then perhaps the truths of morality are the exception.
That is, relativism is self-refuting!

2. Relativism prevents us from praising or criticizing other cultures.
Consider what we might think of a country with universal health care coverage, or with high literacy rates.
In order to praise a culture, we have to be able to understand it.
And if we understand it, we can evaluate it.

Similarly, relativism prevents us from criticizing other cultures.
Consider again the Aztecs, who practiced ritual human sacrifice.
We do not really want to respect other cultures so much that we are willing to accept such heinous practices.
Both relativism and nihilism remove the ability to debate.
They make each individual, at every time, perfect. See Pojman, p 42

3. Relativism makes each society perfect, and prevents us from seeing reform as progress.
Pojman mentions the end of slavery, and suttee as progress.
Also, presuming that the law embodies the culture's morality, civil disobedience would have to be immoral.
If right and wrong are determined by the culture, there is no position in which to stand to evaluate the culture itself.
The validity of the law and morally motivated disobedience are just power struggles, Pojman 43.

4. Problems of pluralism: majority rule and overlapping societies.
Consider an issue on which a society is divided.
It may switch from right to wrong and back, as the opinion of the majority changes.
These are problems of determining what the mores of the dominant culture are.
Similarly, it seems that I can make any action right or wrong, merely by forming my own subculture.

5. The only plausible argument for relativism derives from the indeterminacy of translation, the application of which is flawed.
Translation might be indeterminate to a certain extent.
But, we can communicate well enough to establish moral matters.
There is nothing in indeterminacy of translation which supports relativism.