

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2006  
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## I. Nihilism, Relativism, and Absolutism

Consider the following logical truth:

Either there is:

- A) no morality;
- B) exactly one morality; or
- C) more than one morality.

You must decide which one of these options is right.

Each has a name:

Position A) is called moral nihilism

There is no morality, but just an illusion, an expression of preference, conditioning, or brainwashing.

Consider how morality is learned, through reward and punishment.

Nietzsche and the will of the strong.

Position C) is called ethical relativism.

There are two types:

- 1) Cultural relativism: Morality depends on your culture, society, religion, or other grouping.
- 2) Subjectivism: Morality depends on the individual.

Again, consider how we learn moral facts.

On either position, there is no right/wrong outside society, or subculture, or family.

King Darius (Persians) brought the Callatians and the Greeks to court to prove relativism.

Callatians were cannibals, ate their dead.

Greeks cremated their dead.

Each thought the others' practice was not just repugnant but immoral.

Position B) is called moral absolutism, there is just one set of rights and wrongs.

This is a claim about what exists, not what we know.

We may be ignorant of the right morality.

So, we can be absolutists, without being dogmatists, without insisting on the truth of our morality.

We will see a variety of examples of absolutism, throughout the course.

## II. Moral Nihilism

Nihilism seems incoherent.

If there is no right and wrong, even for ourselves, then it is puzzling that we use these terms as motivations.

These terms must be mere expressions of bare, unjustified preference.

Contrast ethics with food preferences, about which we are nihilistic.

There is no fact of the matter about whether broccoli tastes better than chocolate.

I may prefer one, or the other, but my preference need not apply to others.

If some one says that she has different tastes, there is no fact which will decide whether she or I is right.

We can urge someone to consider different preferences, but after that, it is up to them to decide.

The question of what we prefer is distinct from the question of which it is better to eat.

There may be good reasons to eat broccoli rather than chocolate.

We are considering, in contrast, which we like best.

Morality seems different than preferences regarding the taste of food.  
When we choose not to rape or murder, we do not think of it as a mere preference.  
It seems to have a force for others.

The nihilist says that we are merely conditioned to think in terms of morality, even though there is no such thing.  
Some of what we might be tempted to think of as nihilism may be better interpreted as moral subjectivism.  
Nihilism says that right and wrong are illusions.  
Subjectivism says that right and wrong are real, but only for the individual.  
The differences are subtle.  
The nihilist can never make moral errors, though the subjectivist can.

### III. Ethical relativism

Remember, ethical relativism can take either of two forms.  
One can say morality is relative to one's culture, which is called cultural relativism.  
Or, one can say that morality depends on the individual, which is called subjectivism.

Five reasons one might favor ethical relativism:

1) Everyone does decide for themselves how to act.

This could be misinterpreted as an argument for relativism.

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

This is a merely descriptive claim.

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

There are different moral codes in different societies.

Different people believe that different actions are right and wrong.

Still, this does not tell us about the source of morality.

It only tells us about how we learn about morality.

This argument thus 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) Society and family act as support for difficult moral decisions.

A brief aside:

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.

4) Relativism may explain differences in practices among diverse cultures.

Some societies accept polygamy, marriage of children, slavery, homosexuality.

People who live in these societies accept these practices.

Consider the Betty/Sarah examples from Shaw, p 38.

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

See Midgley, p 33.

Midgley calls this relativism "moral isolationism," since it isolates each society's morality from others.