

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2006
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Lecture Notes, February 8

I. Quiz: Distinguish the two types of ethical relativism.

II. Problems with Ethical Relativism

1) It prevents us from praising 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.

2) Similarly, relativism prevents us from criticizing other cultures.

Consider the Aztecs, who practiced ritual human sacrifice.

Midgley provides the example of tsujigiri: trying out one's new sword on a passing stranger.

We don't really want to respect other cultures so much that we're willing to accept such heinous practices.

Both relativism and nihilism remove the ability to debate.

They make each individual, at every time, perfect. See Shaw, p 37.

3) Relatedly, relativism makes each society perfect, and so prevents us from seeing change as progress. E.g. the end of slavery.

If right and wrong are determined by the culture, there is no position in which to stand to evaluate the culture itself.

Midgley argues that we can maintain respect without lapsing into isolationism and 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 isolationists to avoid hypocrisy and judgmentalism.

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

See Midgley, p 34.

In fact, Midgley argues, in order to try to defend isolationism, we lapse into applying our own standards.

We defend the samurai by appeal to honor and discipline.

We hypothesize the victim's consent.

These show that we are not really isolationists.

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

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

See Shaw, p 38.

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.

Furthermore, it doesn't seem that condemnation of a society is sufficient to determine morality. That is, even if one's actions conflict with the dominant morality of a culture, a further argument is needed to show that that action is wrong.

We don't think it really immoral for someone to breach the mores of a culture, if those aren't really ethical standards.

E.g. intercourse on Sundays, from Shaw, p 38.

4) Problems of majority rule.

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.

5) Problems of overlapping societies.

Shaw discusses these two, which apply more clearly to cultural relativism, rather than subjectivism.

They are problems of determining what the mores of the dominant culture are.

6) The incoherence of relativism.

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!

The inability to praise and criticize other cultures is the most serious problem with ethical relativism.

Consider this description of the massacres in Rwanda, in 1995:

Encouraged by political and civic leaders, the massacring of Tutsis spread from region to region. Following the militia's example, Hutus young and old rose to the task. Neighbors hacked neighbors to death in their homes, and colleagues hacked colleagues to death in their workplaces. Priests killed their parishioners, and elementary-school teachers killed their students. Many of the largest massacres occurred in churches and stadiums where Tutsis had sought refuge - often at the invitation of local authorities, who then oversaw their execution. In mid-April, at least five thousand Tutsis were packed in the Gatwaro Stadium, in the western city of Kibuye; as the massacre there began, gunmen in the bleachers shot zigzag waves of bullets and tossed grenades to make the victims stampede back and forth before militiamen waded in to finish the job with machetes.

Throughout Rwanda, mass rape and looting accompanied the slaughter. Militia bands, fortified with potent banana beer and assorted drugs, were bused from massacre to massacre. Hutu prisoners were organized in work details to clear cadavers. Radio announcers reminded listeners to take special care to disembowel pregnant victims. As an added incentive to the killers, Tutsis' belongings were parceled out in advance - the radio, the couch, the goat, the opportunity to rape a young girl. A councilwoman in one Kigali neighborhood was reported to have offered fifty Rwandese francs apiece (about 30 cents at the time) for severed heads, a practice known as "selling cabbages". (*The New Yorker*, December 18, 1995)

Or, closer to home, the terror attacks of 9/11/01

If you think that there is something immoral here, you can not be a nihilist or a relativist.

You must be an absolutist.

III. Absolutism and Reason-Giving

Shaw argues that appeals to reason-giving are essential to the establishment of a moral position, pp 39-40.

We consider the Rwanda case, and respond by thinking of reasons why such behavior is wrong.

These reasons push us away from relativism.

On cultural relativism, the only reasons required are the dictates of the culture.

They can be seen as the basis for a universal morality.

Absolutism means that there are morally correct answers to ethical questions.

It does not mean that everything that one might think is a moral question is in fact a moral question.

Perhaps the specifics of how we deal with the remains of our dead is not a moral issue, contrary to King Darius's conclusion.

Absolutism should also not entail dogmatism.

It is not a claim that any one knows what the right morality is.

These are, at times, hard questions.

Put relativism aside and, for the remainder of the course, adopt absolutism.

We have now put God, nihilism, and relativism behind us.

If you remain unconvinced of the absolutist perspective, perhaps you can see the rest of the course as a kind of transcendental argument for absolutism.

By this, I mean that you can look at the kind of work the absolutist does, and see if it accounts for the data that you think of as ethical.

If so, then you can take that work itself as an argument for absolutism.

If not, then perhaps you should go back and defend one of the dismissed positions.

As for religion, I do not mean to say that religion has no ethical role.

Ethics has been a central element of many religions, for a long time.

But, religious dictates, which are inappropriate for us here, are often confused with ethical ones.

Remember, we can take the Natural Law perspective, and search for reasons for morality outside of religion.

IV. Toward an Ethical Theory

How do we find out what the morally correct position is?

We are seeking the reasons which naturally constitute morality.

We need an ethical theory: a set of universal principles, valid for every one, that will tell you whether an action is right or wrong.

How can we recognize one?

Five features of an ethical statement (from the contemporary philosopher Louis Pojman, and not in our text):

1. Prescriptive (dos and don'ts)

There are other prescriptive fields: aesthetics (you should use more blue in that sky you are painting), law (you shouldn't make a right turn on red within the city limits); manners (you should tip 15% in restaurants); grammar (you should never end a sentence with a preposition).

2. Universalizable (holds for every one, not: every one should be treated equally)

3. Overriding (over aesthetic, legal, etc.)

4. Public (secrecy defeats action-guiding role; this does not mean we have to preach)

5. Practicable (ought implies can)

Examples of moral theories:

Divine Command theory (see Arthur article)

Utilitarianism (focuses on consequences)

Kantian deontology (focuses on intentions)

Egoism (Right=self-interest)