

Ethical Relativism*

Peter Prevos

30 August 2004

Ethical relativism is the view that a certain form of behaviour is *actually wrong* in cultures which prohibit it and is *actually right* in other cultures which permit it. Ethical relativism argues thus that there are no possible absolute grounds to assess moral claims of different cultures, as they are all right in their own cultural context.

The argument for ethical relativism is based on the ethnographic fact that different cultures around the world subscribe to different moral values. These different moral codes are caused by socialisation of the members of each community, the cultural awareness that there are other cultures with different values and each individual's construction of their biography.

The main attraction to ethical relativism is the idea that it is mere arrogance to try and judge the moral code of another culture, as all moral codes are right within their own cultural context. The relativists argue that this forces us to adopt an attitude of tolerance towards other cultures, as arguing over who is wrong or right is futile.

Bernard Williams' central criticism of ethical relativism is that the relativist concludes from the ethnographic *fact* that different societies have different moral attitudes an *a priori*—non relative—principle to determine the attitude of one society to another; e.g. moral tolerance. When relativists demand universal tolerance, they contradict their own meta-ethical precepts because if inter-cultural tolerance is a rule for *everybody* then it is a *non relative* principle. But we can not derive a non relative moral principle from a meta ethics which claims that there are no non relative principles.

The idea of ethical relativism destroys the possibility of maintaining a *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.¹ The Preamble of this declaration states that

*This paper has been written for the course *Ethics* by Monash University, Melbourne.

¹United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <http://www.un.org/Overview/>

‘inalienable rights of all members of the human family [are] the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’. If the moral code of every culture is actually right as ethical relativism contends, then there is a problem when there are conflicting moral codes. Ethical relativism can not provide an answer to the question what inalienable right all members of the human family should have and concludes from this that there are no inalienable rights that all humans have.

Descriptive relativism is the recognition that different cultures do have different—and sometimes juxtapositional—moral codes. John Mackie argues that this fact pushes us towards rejecting moral facts altogether.² Mackie argues that moral judgements are based on our way of life, they are social constructs, rather than that our way of life is based on externally existing moral values. The argument from relativity and the subsequent denial of objective values is as such the best explanation fitting descriptive realism. Mackie claims that the denial of objective values is simply the most plausible explanation of descriptive realism.

An interesting counter to this argument is the perception that there are some shared values among cultures, which shows that there are indeed objective moral facts—the Universal Declaration of Human rights is an attempt to distill these moral truths. Mackie defends ethical relativism by arguing that there may be ultimate disagreements. However, this does not provide support for ethical relativism since these disagreements may also happen within a certain culture. Mackie’s position does also not show that the core values which we actually share are not objective.

The second stage of Mackie’s exposition is the Argument from Queerness, which states that if there were objective values they would be metaphysically queer—they would be very different from natural facts—and we therefore have no way of knowing them. Mackie thinks that objective values have to objective in a way in a way that they can be considered part of the ‘fabric of the world’ and are dependent upon our very existence. Mackie equates objective truth with a scientific view of the world and because when we look at the world in this way, we don’t find anything that matches our conception of a moral fact, there can be no objective moral facts. Objective values are in the eyes of Mackie a mysterious and queer entity which have no existence in the world.

rights.html – Accessed: 22 August 2004.

²J.L. Mackie, *The argument from ‘Queerness’*, cited in: Peter Singer, editor, *Ethics*, (Oxford University Press, 1994).

References

Kennett, Jeanette and Townsend, Aubrey, editors, *Ethics*, (Churchill: Monash Distance Education Centre, 1998).

Singer, Peter, editor, *Ethics*, (Oxford University Press, 1994).

United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html> – Accessed: 22 August 2004.

Wikipedia, *Relativism*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/Utilitarianism> – Accessed: 22 August 2004.