



MORAL RELATIVISM

A. What is it for something to be relative to something else?

1. Many things are relative to one thing or another. Examples:
 - a) Tallness is relative. What it means to be a tall skyscraper is different from what it means to be a tall person.
 - b) Being fast is relative. What it means to be a fast car is different from what it means to be a fast marathon runner.
 - c) Being hot or cold is relative. A hot day in Alaska is different from a hot day in Guatemala.

A. What is it for something to be relative to something else?

2. A property or trait is relative when we can't say it applies to something without "filling in" some additional blank.
 - Being seven feet high is tall for a person. (true)
 - Being seven feet high is tall for a skyscraper. (false)
 - b) We can't simply say "it snowed." Instead:
 - It snowed in Amherst on Feb. 26, 2006 at 12:55pm
 - It snowed in Riyadh on Feb. 26, 2006 at 12:55pm
 - 5c) Tastes in food or music are relative to *people*:
 - The Beastie Boys' music is enjoyable for Kevin.
 - The Beastie Boys' music is enjoyable for Elizabeth.
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B. Relativism in Ethics

1. There are many ways morality might be said to be relative.

a) It might be thought relative to time and place.

It's morally right for married couples to have sex at night in their bedrooms.

It's morally right for married couples to have sex in mid-afternoon at the local playground.

b) It might be thought relative to other circumstances.

It's morally right for a surgeon to cut a sick patient open with a scalpel.

c) Many such aspects of moral relativity are already automatically captured automatically by focusing on act tokens.

B. Relativism in Ethics

2. Two specific claims with regard to the relativity of ethics.

a) **Cultural relativism:** The claim that the fundamental principles governing what acts are morally right or wrong depend in some crucial way on the particular culture, society, civilization or social group in question.

b) **Subjective relativism:** The claim that the fundamental principles governing what acts are morally right or wrong vary from person to person even within a certain culture, society or civilization.

Both claims lead to similar philosophical issues.

I'll focus mostly on (a).

B. Relativism in Ethics

3. Why did I add the clause "the fundamental principles governing ..." when stating these views?

a) Otherwise almost every ethical theory would be a kind of relativism.

b) Consider Strong Divine Command Theory:

God commanded Noah to build an Arc.

God did not command Kevin to build an Arc.

Still, the *fundamental principle* governing what *makes actions right* does not vary from person to person.

c) Very important to be clear about what you mean by saying that "morality is [or is not] relative"

C. Cultural Relativism

1. An argument for cultural relativism:

P1. Ethical beliefs and practices differ profoundly from one culture to another.

P2. If ethical beliefs and practices differ profoundly from one culture to another, then the fundamental principles governing what acts are morally right or wrong vary from culture to culture.

C. Therefore, the fundamental principles governing what acts are morally right or wrong vary from culture to culture.

This argument is valid. Is it sound?

C. Cultural Relativism

2. The first premise: ethical beliefs and practices vary

a) Anthropological and historical evidence suggest that different cultures at different times differ over:

- cannibalism
- polygamy
- homosexuality
- property rights
- free speech
- equality between the sexes
- appropriate modes of dress, etc.

b) Do these differences count as “profound”?

c) Given the next premise, it seems that the differences would have to be about the *fundamental principles*.
This is less clear.

C. Cultural Relativism

3. The second premise: does it matter that beliefs or practices vary?

a) Believing something doesn’t make it true.

Until recently, different cultures had different beliefs about whether the Earth was flat.

This doesn’t mean that the shape of the Earth is relative to culture!

b) The issue at hand is about whether *what ACTUALLY is right or wrong* varies from culture to culture.

c) But perhaps morality is different from the shape of the Earth.

C. Cultural Relativism

d) Perhaps morality is just a matter of **convention**.

The purpose of morality is to allow for peaceful coexistence.

If two different sets of principles are adopted by two different cultures, but both allow for coexistence and interaction, is there anything that makes one set “the true principles”?

e) But is this the basis or purpose of morality?

Is it true that *widely* different *fundamental* principles really allow for peaceful coexistence and interaction?

C. Cultural Relativism

4. If Cultural Relativism is true, the next question is *HOW* does morality depend on culture?

Here's a possibility, which I call *Strong Cultural Relativism*:

(SCR) An act X performed by person P at time T is morally right if and only if X is the act that the majority of members of P's culture would approve of, endorse or advocate that P perform at time T.

C. Cultural Relativism

5. Problems for SCR

a) What does it mean to a member of a society?

I am: an American
a resident of Massachusetts
a native of Wisconsin
a white male
a philosophy professor
a member of the Bertrand Russell Society

Which one is my “culture”?

SCR may give me different answers as to what is right depending on what group I pick.

C. Cultural Relativism

b) It advocates a morality of conformity: an act is right if only if it conforms to majority opinion.

c) *The Social Reformers Dilemma*: Consider Raoul, who lives in a society with a long practice of slavery. In the society, slaves are a minority of people in the society, and almost all the non-slaves see nothing morally wrong with holding or buying slaves. Indeed, such people think those who work to liberate slaves are themselves immoral thieves.

P1. If SCR is true, then Raoul the Reformer's acts of liberating slaves are morally wrong.

P2. Raoul the Reformer's acts of liberating slaves are not morally wrong.

C. Therefore, SCR is not true.

D. Subjective Relativism

1. The claim that morality varies from person to person.
2. An argument for subjective relativism
 - P1. Different people have different values, goals and ideals.
 - P2. If different people have different values, goals and ideals then there is no objective basis for morality.
 - P3. If there is no objective basis for morality, then subjective relativism is true.
 - C. Therefore, subjective relativism is true.
3. (P1) is hard to deny.
4. (P2) and (P3) are very difficult to evaluate without making the notion of “objective basis” more precise.

E. Relativism, Multiculturalism and Tolerance

1. These issue often seen as linked
2. Sometimes it is argued that showing respect for different cultures and their beliefs means we must accept relativism.
3. But is this really a good argument for relativism?
4. According to SCR, it is morally right to respect other cultures if and only if the majority of others in your culture approve of showing such respect.

If the majority of people in your culture think that all Christians should be stoned to death on sight, then that's what you should do.

E. Relativism, Multiculturalism and Tolerance

5. Do non-relativistic moral theories do any better?

a) Naturally it depends on the theory

b) Consider Utilitarianism:

Suppose you were a Utilitarian, and then you came upon a person who did not believe in Utilitarianism.

Should you show respect and tolerance anyway?

Respect will make people happy.

Intolerance will make lots of people unhappy.

So according to utilitarianism, you ought to be tolerant of other attitudes, even if they are not utilitarian.