

# Things I Need to Know on Relativism

## Theoretical Questions

### What is moral relativism?

- Empirical thesis: there are deep and widespread moral disagreements
  - Descriptive Moral Relativism (DMR): As a matter of empirical fact, there are deep and widespread moral disagreements across different societies [i.e. that there is moral diversity], and these disagreements are much more significant than whatever agreements there may be. (from SEP)
    - Problem: even this phrasing uses evaluative terms like 'deep' and 'significant'
    - Response: the use of evaluative terms demonstrate the point that people differ on their judgements of 'deep' and 'significant'
- Metaethical thesis: the truth or justification of moral judgements is not absolute, but relative to the moral standard of some person or group of persons
  - Metaethical Moral Relativism (MMR): The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons. (from SEP)
    - Implication: moral judgements have moral authority / normative force but only relative to some group or culture (not universally as objectivists contend)
    - Truth value of moral judgement is relative to society; e.g. "polygamy is wrong" might be true for one society but not another
    - The justification of moral judgements is relative rather than absolute because there is no rational basis for resolving the attitudinal differences in the contrasting societies

### What are the alternative views to moral relativism?

- MORAL SCEPTICISM
  - We are never justified in accepting or rejecting moral judgments
- MORAL OBJECTIVISM (SEP)
  - Moral judgments are ordinarily true or false in an absolute or universal sense
  - People are justified in accepting true moral judgments (and rejecting false ones) on the basis of evidence available to any reasonable and well-informed person
- MORAL REALISM (Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy)
  - There are moral facts and moral values that are objective and independent of our perception of them or our beliefs, feelings or other attitudes towards them
- Objectivism VS Realism (Pendlebury 2011)
  - Realism endorses a particular standard – the robust truth— which can be described
  - "Objectivism does not require the standards of correctness to be of any particular type, but—unlike realism—is committed to the possibility of knowing that they are satisfied in some nontrivial cases"

- MORAL NON-COGNITIVISM, EXPRESSIVISM, ANTI-REALISM, NIHILISM etc. >> moral judgements lack truth value beyond the fact that it is true because it was exerted by some moral agent ('exerting S makes S true')
- ERROR THEORY >> moral judgments are always false

### What is Hume's argument?

- Short version
  - David Hume maintained that most of us are born without moral conscience, yet we can have approbations, the desire that things unfold in a particular way. Individuals can have feelings of rightness or wrongness towards certain actions that they project to the world. Rightness and wrongness arises as an intersubjective standard resulting from the collective coordination of individual feelings towards an act, such that if everybody were to die, there would not be a moral code. Put simply: something being right or wrong, for Hume, is entirely a function of whether people think it is right or wrong, just as how the funniest comedian is the output of a function of individuals' opinions on who the funniest comedian is.
  - In *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals (1748): A Dialogue*, Hume writes about the moral differences between Greek and French societies: "Have the gods forbid self-murder? An Athenian allows, that it ought to be forborn. Has the Deity permitted it? A Frenchman allows, that death is preferable to pain and infamy." While suicide is permitted according to the French moral code, it is against Greek moral values to commit suicide. Hume describes moral divergence figuratively: "The Rhine flows north, the Rhone south; yet both spring from the *same* mountain, and are also actuated, in their opposite directions, by the *same* principle of gravity. The different inclinations of the ground, on which they run, cause all the difference of their courses." In other words, moral codes can be different, or even opposing, despite coming from the same initial sentiments and that the force that create this divergence may be a common force.
- Long version
  - David Hume maintained that we have senses such as touch, sight and smell. Our sense organs need to be educated to enable us to discern physical objects from one another, for example to understand what is a plant pot versus a bucket. However, we do not possess a moral sense – faculties that discern moral properties. We cannot see good or bad in the world as we can use our other senses to see a plant pot or a bucket; we can only scientific facts, such as "this man shot another with a bullet travelling at 400m/s." Most of us are born without moral conscience, yet we can have approbations, the desire that things unfold in a particular way. Individuals can have feelings of rightness or wrongness towards certain actions that they project to the world. Rightness and wrongness arises as an intersubjective standard resulting from the collective coordination of individual feelings towards an act, such that if everybody were to die, there would not be a moral code.
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- There is a debate on where Hume’s position truly is. Some scholars argue that Hume is an extreme subjectivist, because he seems to suggest that each individual has their own standard. For example, if A says X is spicy but B says X is not spicy, both A and B can be taken as saying true things. Nonetheless, others hold that Hume takes a more intersubjective position, because he argues that the moral standard is the collective standard. Something being right or wrong, for Hume, is entirely a function of whether people think it is right or wrong, just as how the funniest comedian is the output of a function of individuals’ opinions on who the funniest comedian is. A side point to note is that Hume probably did not intend for each individual to be allocated an equal vote. In his *Of the Standard of Taste*, he writes about aesthetic experts having more say in what is aesthetic. It would be sensible to extrapolate that thought to the realm of morality – that there are moral experts whose votes count more, and that true judges are true judges because they are cohesively judging such that it becomes a standard.
- Problems with Hume’s argument
  - Naturalistic fallacy: Hume says his view is convincing because we can’t think of morality as a fact BUT fact-type claims can be phrased as is/ought but Hume’s morality cannot be phrased in such a way since what is the correct thing to do is context dependent
  - PP adds:
    - Circularity: true judges seem to imply that there is a specific ‘correct’ standard that the true judges consistently adhere to; how is the true judge determined in the first place?
      - If true judge determined by getting the first judgement correct, then what if they guessed? One can become a true judge by coincidence.
      - If they are determined by seeing whose thoughts align with the majority in most instances, then how many iterations does it take to determine who is a true judge?
      - Very arbitrary process of determining the true judge
      - BUT maybe for pragmatic purposes e.g. to determine a ruler

**Does Hume's relativist position extend to prohibiting people from judging another society?**

- YES
  - Hume would say that if one is a coherent intersubjectivist/cultural relativist, then one would struggle to judge another society
  - Suppose an individual was brought up in Victorian Britain such that they had no problem saying that traditional African societies are morally inferior. Then, as a member of the Victorian British society, the utterance that “traditional African societies are morally inferior” would come out as true. However, as a relativist, they would realise that their first-order utterance that “traditional African societies are morally inferior” is not objectively true, merely true for some such as their fellow society members.
  - It is in this sense that Hume’s relativist position prohibits people from judging another society

**What are the varieties of moral relativist views?**

Philosopher/ Idea	View Summary	Defense	Challenges	Relate to Hume
Content Relativism	Sentences may have different contents (meanings) in different frameworks	E.g. ‘fit’ in English means it is a good fit while the transliterated ‘fit’ in Thai means it is too small	If repeated disagreements on the term occur then people will just come to realise they are referring to different concepts and change the word for it	
Truth Relativism (version ordinarily assumed)	Sentences have the same content in different frameworks BUT their truth value may vary across the different frameworks	E.g. “suicide is morally right” may be true relative to X (Shintoism) but false relative to Y (Buddhism) but ‘suicide’ means ‘to kill oneself’ in both instances	<p>Response 1: for a disagreement to occur there must be some prerequisite agreement on the meanings of other words; BUT we cannot just suppose other moral agreements; (Davidson 1984)</p> <p>Response 2: Morality is not an ordinary concept (cannot just re-label and resolve the problem)</p>	

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MMR as a consequence of the general relativist thesis (SEP)	The truth/ justification of all judgements is not absolute or universal, but relative to some groups or persons	Each society has its own conceptual framework that may not be commensurable with the frameworks of other societies	Most philosophers that defend moral relativism reject general relativism; E.g. Prinz (2007) associate moral relativism with naturalism, which presupposes the objectivity of the natural sciences	Hume does not address commensurability but Tim Mawson thinks he does not preclude the possibility of commensurability (or incommensurability)
Rovane (2011) (SEP)	There is no basis for showing that, among various incompatible alternatives, one moral judgement is rationally superior to another  Emphasis is on aspects of morality rather than moral disagreement	Moral judgements in different societies are normatively insulated from one another  Truth-bearers in one world are not logically related to truth-bearers in another world so there can be no strict disagreement		
Prinz (2007): Moral sentimentalism (SEP)	An action is morally right or wrong iff some observer of the action has a sentiment of approbation or disapprobation (approval/ disapproval) concerning it	People sometimes have conflicting sentiments about the same action  E.g. 'X is morally right' is true if the person who says it approves of X and false if they disapprove  Moral judgements are relative to the sentiments of the person who makes them	No relationship can be established between emotions and moral values because emotions fluctuate but moral values are stable => the approach is dispositional and does not demand that our moral judgements contain an emotional manifestation	Similar to Hume in viewing morality in terms of individual approbations of different acts

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Harman (1975): Inner Judgement	Morality arises when a group of people reach an implicit agreement or come to a tacit understanding about their relations with one another	<p>Moral judgements make sense only in relation to and with reference to one or another such agreement or understanding</p> <p>Inner judgments are judgments made when we say that someone should or ought to have done something or that someone was right or wrong to have done something</p> <p>“Ought (A, D, C, M)” = given that agent A has motivating attitudes M and circumstances C, D is the course of action for A that is supported by the best reasons</p> <p>Seeing morality as a compromise based on implicit bargaining helps to explain why our morality takes it to be worse to harm someone than to refuse to help someone – because the person harmed would not agree to being harmed (even if you agree at one point, your instincts would try to save your life such that you could not have agreed to it in the first place)</p> <p>Subjective view of morality; can change according to sentiments in society e.g. on issues of racism/sexism</p>	<p>(1) Why should someone stick to an agreement? =&gt; To agree is to intend to carry out one's part of the agreement on the condition that others do their parts; intend to do sth = motivated to do it</p> <p>(2) Not all agreements are morally binding e.g. those made under compulsion =&gt; if agreement = agreement in intentions, then there was no agreement in the first place</p> <p>(3) Implicit agreements are too weak a basis on which to found morality; if they had already agreed why is there a problem with making it explicit? =&gt; agreements sometimes hard to specify e.g. the understanding that exists among the members of a team of acrobats or a symphony orchestra</p>	<p>Avoids the naturalistic fallacy Hume faces i.e. can put morality in terms of is/ought; ought limited to moral “ought to do”</p> <p>Note: other ‘oughts’: “ought” of expectation) = expect agent to do so; “ought” of rationality = it is in their interest to do so; normative “ought to be” = it is a good thing that they do so</p> <p>Harman allows for a one-person society where the persons solely defines the moral code whereas Hume doesn't</p>

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Copp (1995): Meta-ethical pluralist	Something is morally wrong only if it is wrong in relation to the justified moral code of some society and a code is justified only if the society would be rationally required to select it	All societies have the same basic needs but each society also has a need to maintain its population and system of cooperation from one generation to another [functionalist]  Since basic needs are fundamental, most moral codes will be similar		The 'gravity' that causes the difference in the flow of the two rivers in Hume's <i>A Dialogue</i> may be the forces of functionalism
Wong (1996): pluralistic relativism	More than one morality may be true [relativist], but there are limits on which moralities are true [objectivist]	Objective determinants based on naturalistic understandings of humans e.g. biology, psychology quite limited and insufficient to provide detailed morality  Morality's function is to promote both cooperation and individual flourishing; hence, the impersonal perspective must be limited by the personal perspective  The different true moralities need not be completely different from one another; often they share the same values with different priorities assigned  Pluralistic relativism best explains "moral ambivalence"		Wong (1996) agrees with Hume's idea that physical senses are distinct from moral senses
Foot (2002): mixed view leaning towards objectivism	There are some objective moral truths but not all moral disagreements can be resolved rationally	Some objective moral truths are such as the Holocaust being wrong  Nonetheless, some moral judgements may be true with respect to one society but false with respect to another (just as we might say about beauty standards)	Gave up too much of objectivism; rationally irresolvable agreements may come to be resolvable with a greater understanding of human nature	

Philosopher/ Idea	View Summary	Defense	Challenges	Relate to Hume
Williams (1981): relativism of distance	Ethical appraisals are appropriate in real confrontations but not notional confrontations	Williams rejected strict moral relativism, which claims that ethical propositions have validity only respective to a society  Real confrontation: a divergent outlook is a real option for us; Notional confrontation: a divergent outlook is known but is not a real option for us  E.g. we can acknowledge but not appraise the moral judgements of a medieval samurai; since it is not a real option for us so we cannot say whether they are just	If the confrontations are real because they involve something in common, this could support the objectivist view, which Williams also rejected (although he also rejected a number of non-objectivist views)	

### What are some of objections to moral relativism?

- Bernard Williams, in *Interlude: Relativism*, called relativism “the anthropologist's heresy, possibly the most absurd view to have been advanced even in moral philosophy.” (Williams 1972)
- Three (most distinctive and influential) relativist propositions Williams wants to object
  - (1) ‘Right’ can only be coherently understood as meaning ‘right for a given society’
  - (2) ‘Right for a given society’ is supposed to be understood in a functionalist sense
  - (3) It is therefore wrong for people in one society to condemn, interfere, etc., with the values of another society
- PP notes: Functionalism is the idea that all aspects of a society—institutions, roles, norms, etc. —serve a purpose and that all are indispensable for the long-term survival of the society (Britannica)
- Objection 1: Propositions (1) and (3) are contradictory
  - Proposition (3) implies a non-relative sense of right, which is not allowed for in proposition (1), which advocates relativism
  - If we can judge or interfere with other societies’ values based on ours then we are not holding the non-relativist view
- Objection 2: Understanding society in the functionalist sense is problematic; Proposition 2 imports functionalist problems into relativism
  - Functionalists focus on the long term survival of society
  - If survival is understood in terms of members of those communities having descendants then many functionalist propositions about the necessity of cultural survival will be false

- E.g. Welsh nationalists maintain that the survival of the Welsh language is a condition of the survival of Welsh society
- Merely having descendants is not 'enough' for the sustenance of the community
- If survival is understood in terms of the survival of values, and if 'societies' are understood as groups with certain values, then functionalist propositions are tautological
  - "it is tediously a necessary condition of the survival of a group-with-certain-values that the group should retain those values"
- Objection 3: There are certain moral values that makes (3) very unintuitive
  - Morality is not mere social etiquette
    - There are inherent features of morality that makes it difficult to regard a morality as applying only to a group (PP adds: there are some inherent 'universalisability features')
    - Not just 'when in Rome do as the Romans do'
  - E.g. Williams writes about a book by Bernal de Diaz who went with Cortez to Mexico
    - "This morally unpretentious collection of bravos was genuinely horrified by the Aztec practices"
    - BUT maybe they were not supposed to be there so their moral judgements are invalid
    - William's response: If a burglar comes across the owner of the house trying to murder somebody, is he morally obliged not to interfere because he is trespassing?
    - PP response: depends on whether the moral code each agent adheres to favours trespassing (e.g. if one moral society has as its greatest moral principle that one should mind their own business then it would be wrong; in contrast, if the principle was to prioritise stopping people from doing moral wrong, then it would be correct to try to stop the murder => we can allow for moral disagreements to arise between the agents)
  - PP's position: Proposition (2) is dispensable, such that (3) does not follow
    - A moral rule does not need to be functionalist; you can say 'it just is' without having to justify (non-cognitivist just like Ayer)
      - Ayer holds the emotivist view that ethical sentences do not express propositions but emotional attitudes; this is also known as the Boo-Hurrah theory
- Relativism is self-refuting
  - "Everything is subjective" is nonsense
    - If everything was actually subjective then the statement would be false, because then the statement's truth value would depend on the agent and cannot be put in terms of a blanket statement
    - Someone who believes that "everything is subjective" would not claim that "everything is subjective" because they would recognise that "everything is subjective," even the statement itself

- If everything was objective, then the statement that “everything is subjective” must be false
- We cannot criticise our own claims (and hence come to prefer a particular moral code) without utilising reason from some other perspective to support those criticisms
  - PP adds: BUT there can be the case where society A’s moral code is a product of reasoning partially from society B’s moral code and partially from society C’s moral code
    - Just because we have to employ foreign reason does not mean whatever views we form are non-unique in a way that is damaging to relativism
- Nagel (1997): there is a hierarchy of thoughts and at the top level there is reason
  - “the authority of reason is something independent, something of which the hierarchy of our thoughts is an appropriate reflection”
  - (1) All thoughts must be a conception of what objectively (not subjectively or relatively) is the case
  - (2) Some thoughts can regulate and constrain others
  - PP adds: this is the view that propositions can be split into levels; in the bottom level propositions may be subjective and subjectivism may be true; in the higher level (metaethical level), statements about the lower level propositions must be objective

**What is so important about functionalism that it appears as a defense for a number of relativist theories?**

- Some relativists might worry they cannot say that ‘good’ means the same thing in every society
- If so, the strategy can instead be to try to figure out the commonalities in each societies’ use of the word ‘good’
- One possible commonality is the functional role the word ‘good’ has i.e. that it has a positive regulatory role
- Thus, functionalism is important because it allows us to recognise the conceptual commonalities languages cannot convey, and so act as a solution to some central problems for relativists

**Are moral disagreements rationally resolvable? (SEP)**

- If moral disagreements can be resolved rationally, then there is little incentive to endorse the disagreements-based arguments supporting MMR – that the truth or falsity of moral judgments is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons
- YES
  - Objectivists maintain that moral disagreements tend to arise from at least a party failing to be logical, perhaps because they are influenced by passion, prejudice, self-interest, ideology, and the like; once they notice and correct their mistakes, the moral dispute can be resolved

- Relativists allow for the possibility for moral disagreements to be resolved rationally in the case where the moral frameworks of the two societies coincide
- NO
  - Even objectivists allow for the inability for rationality to resolve moral disagreements in cases where the concept involved is indeterminate, vague, or if the relevant facts are unknown (e.g. in the case where the agent is deciding which wire to cut to deactivate a bomb, but they do not know which wire would save them and which would cause an explosion)
  - Relativists maintain that if moral disagreements are rooted in fundamentally different moral orientations then the disagreement cannot be resolved by pointing out that the other party has made factual or logical mistake
    - BUT arguing from different moral frameworks does not preclude the possibility of resolving the dispute rationally
      - MacIntyre (1994): it is possible to realise, through imagination, that a conflicting moral tradition is rationally superior to one's own tradition
        - A gap to fill: Relativists still have to provide an account of why it makes sense to adopt another moral framework deemed superior as one own, or even to acknowledge the existence of other frameworks; aren't the frameworks supposed to be incommensurable and hence cannot be transitively compared?
      - In particular, objectivists usually argue that a particular moral framework (Kantian, Utilitarian, Aristotlean Virtue Ethics etc.) is superior to all other moral frameworks; they may just have to come to realise that the particular objectivist-chosen framework is superior
      - BUT even among objectivists, there are still disputes on which moral framework is the correct one

### **Is morality uniform across societies? (SEP)**

- If morality is uniform across societies, then it works as evidence for objectivism (but not necessarily against relativism)
- YES
  - Wattle (1996): the role-reversal test ("do unto others as you would have them do unto you") is prominent both in Western and non-western traditions, such as in Confucian and Buddhist texts
  - Donnelly (2013): the international human rights movement indicates substantial moral agreement; Basic moral prohibitions against lying, stealing, killing etc. are found across many societies
  - Küng (1996): there is a common "global ethic" across the world's major religious traditions regarding respect for human life, distributive justice, truthfulness and the moral equality of men and women (SEP)
  - Foot (1978): there are shared criteria of 'rude' such that not just any kind of behaviour can be considered 'rude'; in the same way, there are shared criteria for moral obligation such that not just anything could be of moral value

- NO
  - These only cover particular aspects of morality but not all
    - If being moral was limited to refraining from lying, stealing, killing etc., society would still be an unhappy place
  - Against Foot (1978): the criteria is not so simple; courage understood as “confronting difficulty to achieve some perceived good” can mean both pacifists and warriors are courageous

### **How can relativism and objectivism be reconciled? (SEP)**

- Meta-ethical pluralists believe that there are many substantial moral disagreements but also some striking moral agreements across societies
- Taking the view of plural relativism, Wong (1996) argues, is the best way to explain MORAL AMBIVALENCE – the phenomenon of morally disagreeing with someone while recognising that the person is still reasonable in making the conflicting judgement
- Meta-ethical pluralists are such as Copp (1995), Wong (1996), Foot (2002) and Williams (19821) (see *table*); also Nussbaum (1993) who builds on Foot’s argument and virtue ethics, and Berlin (1998) although he rejected the label ‘relativism’

## **Applied Cases**

### **Is slavery wrong for moral relativists?**

- Harman (1975): depends on the implicit agreements in society (p.17-18)
  - First Society: longstanding and accepted tradition of hereditary slavery but also basic moral agreement which speak against slavery
    - Moral consensus in this society would be defective
    - E.g. through myth that slaves are beasts
    - Once exposed, people will have to realign their moral understanding
    - “one starts out with the intention of adhering to a particular agreement, may be that one should stop intending to adhere to certain aspects of that agreement and should try to get others to do the same.” (p.17-18)
  - Second Society: hereditary slavery whose agreement has no aspects that speak against slavery
    - “even if the facts of the situation were fully appreciated, no incoherence would appear in the basic moral understanding of the society” (p.18)
    - They do not understand our inner judgement like aliens would not so we can say this kind of society is unjust but not that it is morally wrong
    - “We can say that the second society is unfair and unjust, that the slavery that exists is wrong, that it ought not to exist. But it would be inappropriate in this case to say that it was morally wrong of the slave owners to own slaves. The relevant aspects of our moral understanding, which we would invoke in moral

judgments about them, are not aspects of the moral understanding that exists in the second society” (p.18)

### **Is it wrong to torture animals?**

- Relativism perspective: there might be a conflict between what the individual deems moral and what they, as a consequence of the overall balance of society's views, deem moral
  - He desires torturing animals and it's wrong because you think it's wrong
    - It would be wrong for you to think it's ok
    - BUT what if most ppl think it's right? then you both think it's wrong and it's right
- Determinism perspective
- Frankfurt: the agent is freely acting if acting according to higher order desires
  - E.g. higher order desire to be healthy so quit first-order desire to want cigarettes

### **References**

- SEP = Gowans (2004): <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/>