



What Is Moral Relativism?

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This is the last part of a two part series. You can read the first part here

Before defining moral relativism, we need to make two distinctions. The first regards what we mean when we say something is right or wrong, and the second deals with the difference between a subjective and an objective truth.

Two Wrongs, Two Rights

The statements 'One ought not kill innocent people' and 'One ought to believe that London is in the United Kingdom' are two entirely different kinds of statements. Both make truth claims, but they differ in that each distinguishes a kind of 'ought' - one the moral ought and the other the rational ought. The first suggests a moral obligation; the second an obligation based on reason.

There are two kinds of oughts, and there are two ways to be wrong about something. We can be wrong by being irrational, or we can be wrong by being unethical. Morality deals with the second.

Rational errors can be distinguished from moral wrongs in this way. Nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill pointed out that moral wrongs are the kinds of things for which punishment seems justified. [1] We don't punish people merely for getting their sums wrong in maths. Their errors would be rational, not moral. But a man who beats his wife is not simply incorrect; he's immoral. When there is a rational wrong, we correct the error. When there is a moral wrong, we correct - or punish - the person.

Two Truths

Just as there are two ways to be right or wrong, there are also two ways for something to be true: it can be subjectively true or it can be objectively true.

When I say, 'Haagen-Dazs butter pecan ice cream is absolutely delicious,' I have said something true, because this statement accurately reflects my personal tastes.[2] Notice, however, that what I have said is not really about ice cream. I have not made a claim about an object outside of me, a half-eaten pint of frozen dessert sitting on my counter. Rather I have said something about the subject, me.

My statement about the taste of Haagen-Dazs ice cream is a *subjective* truth. It is true for me, the subject, but not for the object, the ice cream itself. The ice cream doesn't 'taste'; I taste it. The experience of flavour pertains to me as a subject, not to the ice cream as an object. That's why when I comment on the flavour, I'm talking about something true about me, not about the ice cream-subjective, not objective.

Tastes are personal. They're private. They're individual. If you didn't like butter pecan and favoured chocolate instead, it would be strange to say that you were wrong. You should not be faulted, it seems, for having different subjective tastes about desserts than someone else.

What if my claim was not about flavours, though, but about numbers? If I say that the sum of two plus two is four, I'm making a different sort of claim than stating my taste in ice cream. As a subject, I'm communicating a belief that I hold about an external, *objective* truth.

If you disagreed and said that two plus two equals five, I could claim you were wrong without being accused of an impropriety. In themselves, mathematical equations are either true or false, having one right answer. They do not have a variety of 'right' answers that vary according to individual tastes. If we disagreed on the sum, we'd adjudicate between our two opinions by examining the object itself. Our goal would not be to share our feelings but to find the correct answer, because in this case we believe the truth to be objective 'out there,' not subjective or 'in here.'

Subjective truths are based on internal preferences and change according to our whims. Objective truths, in contrast, are realities in the external world that we discover and cannot be changed by our internal feelings. External facts

are what they are, regardless of how we feel about them.

Doing Their Own Thing

Building on our definitions of objective and subjective truth, we can now see that moral relativism is a type of subjectivism. It holds that moral truths are preferences much like our taste in ice cream. The validity of these truths depends entirely on the one who says, 'It's true for me [the subject] if I believe it.'

Moral relativism teaches that when it comes to morals, that which is ethically right or wrong, people do their own thing. Ethical truths depend on the individuals and groups who hold them.

Believing that ethical truth is subjective, moral relativists therefore react to moral judgments about sexual behaviour, for example, much as if someone said they were wrong because of their choice of desserts: 'Who are you to tell me what I ought to prefer?' To them the words *ought* and *should* are meaningless because everyone's morality is equal; no one has a claim to a morality that is incumbent on others.

Relativism does not require a particular behaviour for everyone in similar moral situations. When faced with exactly the same ethical situation, I might choose one thing, but you may choose the opposite. No universal rules apply to everyone.[3]

Moral relativism is contrasted with moral absolutism, which can mean different things. Minimally, moral absolutism holds that a moral rule is true regardless of whether anyone believes it. It can't be created by personal conviction; nor does it disappear when an individual or culture rejects it. Even if ignored, objective moral rules still maintain their ethical force and are universally binding in all similar cases.[4]

Absolutists hold that moral rules are frequently self-evident in the same way that mathematical truth is self-evident. We don't invent morality; we discover it like we discover multiplication tables.

Revising the Standard

Relativism as a moral system is revisionist because it seeks to redefine what it means to be moral, measuring it by a new standard. Classically, moral systems have had at least three characteristics.' First, morality has been viewed as a supremely authoritative guide to action, trumping considerations of preference, taste,

custom, self-interest, or individual fancy. Moral questions are among the most important we can ask, holding the highest priority in life.

Second, morality includes a prescriptive code of conduct. It doesn't merely *describe* a state of affairs; it *directs* how things should be. Moral rules are action guides that carry with them a sense of obligation, defining how people *ought* to conduct themselves. These injunctions apply not just to actions but to attitudes and motives as well.

Third, morality is universal. Moral rules are not arbitrary and personal but are public, applying equally to all people in relevantly similar situations. If a specific act is wrong for one person, then it is equally wrong for another.

Eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume describes the universal nature of morality this way: 'The notion of morals implies some sentiment common to all mankind which recommends the same object to general approbation and makes every man or most men agree in the same opinion or same discussion concerning it. It also implies some sentiments so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind.'[6]

These last two characteristics - the 'oughtness' of morality and the universal nature of moral rules - are important criteria. Relativism, however, rejects all universal moral rules and abandons the idea of oughtness. It does not refine our understanding of what morality entails but rather rejects it. Indeed, relativism does not even qualify as an ethical system, we can prove this a couple of ways.

No Real Difference

What's the difference between a relativist and a person who admits she has no morality at all? There seems to be none.

How does a relativist make a moral decision? He decides for himself whatever he thinks is best. How does someone with no morality know how to act? She decides for herself whatever she thinks is best.

Even those people with no scruples whatsoever can be said to have 'their own' morality. This illustrates the problem precisely. How can we make sense of an alleged morality that functions the same as not having any morality at all? If a thing cannot be distinguished from its opposite, then the distinction between the two is meaningless.

Thus the first reason relativism does not qualify

as an ethical viewpoint is that the 'morality' of relativism is no different than having no morality at all.

Relativism's Moral Hero

Another way to assess the validity of a moral system is to see what kind of person it produces. Given a particular standard of morality, the person who is most moral is the one who practices the specific system's key moral rule consistently.

To assess the value of the moral rule, Love your neighbour as yourself, for example, look at the principle in action. When this ethic is practiced consistently, it produces someone like Mother Teresa, who was thoroughly selfless and always gave to others. The moral system is validated by the kind of moral hero that results.

The consistent practice of the morality of non-violent passive resistance results in a Mahatma Gandhi. The moral principle requiring perfect obedience to the Father in heaven found its most sublime expression in Jesus of Nazareth. In each case, the quality of the moral hero - the one who most closely lives the ideal - indicates the quality of the moral system.

What kind of moral champion does relativism produce? What is the best that relativism has to offer? What do we call those who most thoroughly apply the principles of relativism, caring nothing for others' ideas of right or wrong, those who are unmoved by others' notions of ethical standards and instead consistently follow the beat of their own moral drum?

In our society, we have a name for these people; they are a homicide detective's worst nightmare. The quintessential relativist is a sociopath, one with no conscience. This is what relativism produces.

Something is terribly wrong with an alleged moral point of view that produces a sociopath as its brightest star. This is another reason relativism does not qualify as an ethical viewpoint.

Relativism does not stand in any great moral tradition. Rather, it has been universally rejected by all. The supreme moral teachers of all time-Moses, Jesus, the apostle Paul, Buddha, Aristotle, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr.-have all condemned this view.

Relativism simply is not a moral point of view. Its 'morality' is no different than having no morality at all, its moral hero is a sociopath, and it has been opposed by every moral tradition. Those who are

relativists have no morality.

Some people will object to this characterization because they wish to keep the label 'moral,' regardless of their ethics. 'How dare you say I have no morality!' they protest. 'I have a morality. I do whatever I please. That's my morality.'

That's our point. Those who are relativists do whatever they want, and doing whatever one wants is not morality. Morality is doing what's right, not necessarily what's pleasant.

The Myth of Moral Neutrality

One of the most entrenched assumptions of relativism is that there is such a thing as morally neutral ground, a place of complete impartiality where no judgments or any 'forcing' of personal views are allowed. Each person takes a neutral posture toward the moral conviction of others. This is the essence of tolerance, the argument goes.

Moral neutrality, though, is a myth, as the next illustration shows. Faye Wattleton, the former president of Planned Parenthood, wrote the following piece, 'Self-Definition: Morality.'

Like most parents, I think that a sense of moral responsibility is one of the greatest gifts I can give my child. But teaching morality doesn't mean imposing my moral value on others. It means sharing wisdom, giving reasons for believing as I do-and then trusting others to think and judge for themselves.

My parents' morals were deeply rooted in religious conviction but tempered by tolerance-the essence of which is respect for other people's views. They taught me that reasonable people may differ on moral issues, and that fundamental respect for others is morality of the highest order.

I have devoted my career to ensuring a world in which my daughter, Felicia, can inherit that legacy. I hope the tolerance and respect I show her as a parent is reinforced by the work she sees me doing every day: fighting for the right of all individuals to make their own moral decisions about childbearing.

Seventy-five years ago, Margaret Sanger founded Planned Parenthood to liberate individuals from the 'mighty engines of repression.' As she wrote, 'The men and women of America are demanding that ... they be allowed to mold their lives, not at the arbitrary command of church or state but as their conscience and judgment may dictate.'

I'm proud to continue that struggle, to defend the rights of all people to their own beliefs. When others try to inflict their views on me, my daughter or anyone else, that's not morality: It's tyranny. It's unfair, and it's un-American.[7]

This is impressively and persuasively written, one of the finest expressions of this view available in the space of five short paragraphs. It sounds so sensible, so reasonable, and so tolerant, but there's a fundamental flaw.

Wattleton's assessment is based on the notion of neutral ground, a place where one can stand that implies no moral judgment. Wattleton is not neutral, however, as her own comments demonstrate.

In her article, Wattleton in effect argues that each of us should respect another's point of view. She then implies, however, that any point of view other than this one is immoral, un-American, and tyrannous. If you disagree with Wattleton's position that all points of view are equally valid, then your point of view is not valid. Her argument self-destructs.

In fact, Wattleton seeks to impose her own absolute on other people: 'Fundamental respect for others is morality of the highest order.' This is a personal moral position she strives to mandate politically. She writes, 'I have devoted my career to ensuring a world in which my daughter, Felicia, can inherit that legacy' What legacy? Her point of view. How does she ensure this? By passing laws. Wattleton has devoted her career to ensuring a world in which her point of view is enforced by law.

We don't object to the political process being used to enforce a particular point of view. What is so disturbing in Wattleton's article is her implication that she is neutral, unbiased, and tolerant, when she is not. The only place of true neutrality is silence. Speak up, give your opinion, state your view, and you forfeit your claim to neutrality.

As a case in point, in May, 1994, Congress passed a law making it a federal offence to block an abortion clinic.' Pamela Maraldo, then president of Planned Parenthood, commented to the press, 'This law goes to show that no one can force their viewpoint on someone else.' But the self-contradiction of her statement is obvious. All laws force someone's viewpoint.

Moral neutrality seems virtuous, but there's no benefit, only danger. In our culture we don't stop

at 'sharing wisdom, giving reasons for believing as [we] do-and then trusting others to think and judge for themselves,' nor should we. This leads to anarchy. Instead we use moral reasoning, public advocacy, and legislation to encourage virtue and discourage dangerous and morally inappropriate behaviour. That is, if we haven't been struck morally paralyzed by relativism.

Our Moral Illiteracy

Relativism today has produced a profound moral illiteracy. Kelly Monroe, editor of *Finding God at Harvard*, calls it 'American roulette – "Just Say No" and "Just Do It" without recognition of a moral reality to decide which to do when.' A society held captive by relativism begins to lose its capacity to think in morally coherent ways or even to draw the most obvious ethical conclusions.

A perfect example of this comes from a conversation I had with an assistant in a doctor's office. While she prepped me for an examination, I decided to get her opinion about the nature of morality.

'Can I ask you a personal question?' I asked. She paused in her work, uncertain how to respond. 'I'm reading a book on ethics, and I want to know your opinion about something.'

'Oh,' she said. 'Okay.'

'Do you believe that morality is absolute, or do all people decide for themselves?'

'What do you mean by morality?' she asked.

'Simply put, what's right and what's wrong,' I answered.

We talked back and forth for a few minutes, and it became evident to me that she was having a difficult time even comprehending the questions I was asking about moral categories. I thought maybe a clear-case example would make the task simpler, a question with an obvious answer, such as, Who is buried in Grant's tomb? or, How long was the Hundred Years War? *[Although the answer is not as obvious as it seems (see here), it does have an answer that most people would generally agree on. Ed.]*

'Is murder wrong?' I asked. 'Is it wrong to take an

innocent human life?'

She waffled. 'Well ...'

'Well ... what?'

'Well, I'm thinking.'

I was surprised at her hesitation. 'What I'm trying to find out is whether morals, right and wrong, are something we make up for ourselves or something we discover. In other words, do morals apply whether we believe in them or not?'

I waited. 'Can we say that taking innocent life is morally acceptable?'

'I guess it depends,' she said tentatively

'Depends on what?' I asked.

'It depends on what other people think or decide.'

I'll make this really easy, I thought. 'Do you think torturing babies for fun is wrong?'

'Well ... I wouldn't want them to do that to my baby.'

'You've missed the point of my question,' I said, a bit exasperated. 'I may not like burned food, but that doesn't mean giving it to me is immoral. Do you believe there is any circumstance, in any culture, at any time in history, in which torturing babies just for pure pleasure could be justified? Is it objectively wrong, or is it just a matter of opinion?'

There was a long pause. Finally she answered, 'People should all be allowed to decide for themselves.'

In reflecting on this conversation, I realized that I would never want this woman on a jury. I would never want her as a social worker, as an employee of a bank, as a teacher, as any kind of medical practitioner, or in any branch of law enforcement. I would not want a person who thinks like this in any position of public trust.

Sadly, this woman's view of ethics is repeated time after time in every level of society. In reality, if she was awakened in the middle of the night by the plaintive screams of a young child being tormented by her neighbour next door, I'm sure she would be horrified by the barbarism. Her moral intuitions would immediately rise to the surface and she'd recoil at such evil. In a

discussion of the issue, however, she seemed incapable of admitting that even this egregious wrong was actually immoral.

My conversation with the doctor's assistant shows how muddled a person's thinking can become after a steady diet of moral relativism.

Notes

[1] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1957 [1861]), 61. Quoted in Hadley Arkes, *First Things* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 25.

[2] Gregory Koukl is speaking

[3] Relativists sometimes will attempt to universalize a personal moral principle by commending consistency. For example, if people determine that an act is wrong for them in one situation, it is wrong the next time they face that situation. But this depends on the virtue of consistency, which itself depends on an absolute: One ought to be consistent.

[4] Some people believe Albert Einstein proved that everything is relative. This, however, is false. Einstein's theories of relativity deal with a number of things, including the problems of absolute simultaneity and the idea of absolute motion. Both theories of relativity (general and special) depend, in part, on something nonrelative. They are based on a fixed constant, the speed of light. Neither the theory has any ramifications for the question of morality.

[5] See Tom L. Beauchamp, *Philosophical Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 16-19.

[6] David Hume, 'Universal Principle of the Closed Frame.' *The Enquiry Concerning Morals*.

[7] Faye Wattleton holds a master's degree in maternal and infant care from Columbia University.

[8] The Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act (FACE). Passed in the Senate on 12 May 1994.

[9] Kelly Monroe, ed., *Finding God at Harvard* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 18.

This is a sample chapter from the book *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* by Greg Koukl and Francis J. Beckwith available in the UK from STL through Wesley Owen bookshops.