Understanding Cultural Relativism: A critical Appraisal of the Theory

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Abstract

The aim of this review article is to reveal the cons and pros of ethical relativism, especially conventionalism. This article is written with the intention of showing some of the practical upshots of conventionalism without totally denying some of its virtues in a world where diversity of cultures and customs is apparent. The article inquires the question: Is ethical relativism tenable? The review article relies on reviewing secondary sources. What I am arguing in this article is that despite the attraction of ethical relativism as an intellectual weapon to fight against ethnocentrism and cultural intolerance, the view still goes against the idea of intercultural comparison, criticism and moral argumentation, so that it would have serious disastrous implication on practice, especially on the universal character of human rights and shutters all together any sort of moral progress and reform. The article concludes that we can set forth certain objective moral codes, discovered through rational intercultural dialogue and discussion which could be applied regardless of cultural specificities upon which cultural inter-comparison, discussion and moral argumentation is possible.

Keywords: Conventionalism; Ethical relativism; Ethical subjectivism; Ethical objectivism

Introduction

Are moral codes/principles binding upon all rational creatures? Are there moral principles which are universally applied for all societies at all time? These questions have been occupying a prominent place in the discussion about morality. The debate about morality – whether there are objective moral principles or not – has had a long history in moral discourse. In this review article, I, therefore, set out a discussion about morality, that is, whether there are objective moral codes which are applied for all societies at all time or not.

People have answered the questions, in a nutshell, in two different ways. Some people, philosophers and other people alike, claiming that there are objective moral principles which transcend cultural circumstances, and are universally binding upon everyone at all times. In the opposite side of the debate, some philosophers take the stance of ethical relativism and endorse the view that moral codes and principles are culture bound and also denounce the existence of culture transcendent moral codes and principles.

Ethical Relativism Vs. Ethical Objectivism

I enunciate my discussion with ethical relativism. Ethical relativism is a doctrine which denies the existence of overarching and objective moral codes and principles to be applied for all people at all time. The theory instead contends that morality is relative to culture and individual choice. Ethical relativism contends that moral principles have truth value – they can be said either true or false. However the criterion of their truth value is the individual or the folkways and mores of a society from which they are articulated. The upshot of ethical relativism is that the validity of moral truths can be ascertained not by any objective and universal moral principle, as there are no any. To put it in other words, ethical relativism affirms the existence of various moral codes which are equally valid, for there are no independent and objective moral principles by which a cultural value may be appraised.

There are two versions of ethical relativism: conventionalism and subjectivism. Conventionalism holds the view that the codes of morality are relative to a culture or society. Subjectivism holds that the validity of moral principles is determined by individual choice. The individual person makes ethical decisions about what is morally good and bad and is responsible to set up his/her own principles. For the purpose of the scope of this study, I am elucidating the view of cultural relativism (conventionalism).

Conventional Ethical Relativism

Conventionalism, as a strand within ethical relativism, emphasizes on societal norms and values to be the locus of moral standards and codes. What is counted morally right and wrong is largely determined by cultural mores and folkways. As the theory elucidates, morality is socially embedded and it is only from the standpoint of cultural practices that the validity of any moral standard is judged. The theory affirms that different cultures and societies have different standards of morally right and wrong actions. Conventional ethical relativism rejects the existence of objective standards in the realm of morality from the fact that different societies have different moral standards. There is no one objective and overarching moral standard applied across all cultures/societies at all times. Instead there are different moral codes which are deeply ingrained in cultural circumstances. Philosopher – John Ladd defines conventional ethical relativism as follows:

> Ethical relativism is the doctrine that the moral rightness of actions varies from society to society and there are no absolute universal moral standards binding in all men at all times. Accordingly, it holds that whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he belongs (quoted in Pojman, 2001:257).

Pojman (2001:257) analyzes the view of conventional ethical relativism by identifying two theses which are actually related to each other. (1) **A diversity thesis** specifies that what is considered right and wrong varies from society to society, so that no moral principles are accepted by all societies and (2) **A dependency thesis** specifies that all moral principles derive their validity from cultural acceptance. The dependency thesis makes the point clear that what is morally right and wrong/the validity of moral actions is determined by the cultural context from which they are ingrained. What one should do and should not do wouldn't be determined by culture transcendent objective moral values, for all standards are conditioned by cultural circumstances. A similar idea is expressed by Pojman about the absence of culture transcendent moral standards. He says, "[t]rying to see things from an independent, non-cultural point of view would be like taking out our eyes to examine their contours and qualities" (Ibid). If there are different moral principles from culture to culture and if all morality is rooted in culture, then it follows that no universal moral principles are valid for all cultures and peoples at all times.

We have come to see enormous variety in social practices throughout the world. We have come to know through the works of anthropologists that different culture and communities have different

standards of behavior to judge what is morally right and wrong. Anthropologists have repeatedly reported that moral values are bound to cultural factors and are also deemed to be appraised by the standards which are embedded within the culture itself. In a word, societies have different conception about the good. What is believed to be "good" in a certain society might be wrong in other culture and society and culture. Conventionalism, therefore, rejects moral standards which are culture transcendent and universally applied everywhere at all times.

Examples which reflect the diversity and even at times conflicting and contradictory moral standards/codes are ample from the works of various anthropologists and sociologists. For example, Eskimos allow their elderly to die due to starvation, but the same act might seem to be abhorrent and morally condemned for most of others. In some societies female infanticide and polygamy are common and dominant social practices whereas in other cultures these acts might seem to be immoral ways of behavior. Anthropologist Ruth Bendict, for instance, carried out empirical research in a tribe in *Melanesia*. In the study she found out that the tribal community views cooperation and kindness as vices. Therefore, she concludes that what is considered to be normal and abnormal about human moral conduct is ingrained within culturally accepted habits. Another anthropologist, Collin Terbull has documented that the IK in northern Uganda have no sense of duty towards their children or parents.

Critical Evaluation of Conventionalism

Relativism, as a non-normative ethical doctrine, has got much attention in recent years for its celebration of pluralism in the sphere of customs and values. It is, indeed, deemed to be an effective intellectual tool to uproot the domination of one culture by another, and, in effect, it fosters the virtue of tolerance. Historical evidences disclose that the cultures of various societies and tribes in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have been characterized as being "primitive" and "irrational," and deemed by some "moral reformers" to stump them out from the moral scene under the guise of "civilization" and moral progress. However, the theory can make sense in promoting people to view cultures and norms other than their own with a sense of respect and to be open-minded at least in a manner that it opens the forum for people to engage in open discussion and argumentation.

The virtue of Conventionalism

The reason why ethical relativism has increasingly been so popular since the second half of the 20th century onwards, albeit its disastrous practical implication, is that the theory's firm stance to undermine any form of ethnocentrism and cultural domination under the guise of objective moral standards, promoting the virtue of tolerance and open-mindedness. It would be, indeed, unfair to completely denounce ethical relativism, for we can find some grain of truth in it. The merit is actually related with its ability to animate people to be open-minded towards the customs and values of various societies other than their own. The theory rightly puts us in guard against the danger of interpreting the values of "others" from a parochial sense of one's customs and values. "It [cultural relativism] seems to be an enlightened response to the 'sins of ethnocentrism,' and it seems to entail or strongly imply an attitude of tolerance toward other cultures" (Pojman: 2001:261). Bendict also discusses about the antidote of cultural relativism towards cultural arrogance. She says:

> We shall arrive at a more realistic social faith, accepting as grounds of hope and as new basis
> for tolerance the coexisting and equal patterns of life which mankind has created for itself
> from the raw materials of existence (quoted in Pojman, 2001:261).

Accordingly, ethical conventionalism warns us not to assume that all our preferences are rational objective way of doing things. Some of our preferences are just ingrained to our social circumstances.

There are some cultural practices which are, indeed, the result of cultural setups, and are limited in their scope of application to that society only. Many (but not all) of our preferences are just ingrained to our social circumstances. It would be, in fact, unjustified to assume that all our preferences and values, which are rooted only and are justified in our society, to be rational objective values applied for all cultures.

Cultural arrogance, at least in part, is the result of assuming one's local values and preferences to be objectively true for everyone. Some preferences are justified only in terms of the culture from which they are articulated. Attempting to appraise the culture of "others" based on one's own cultural factors is what the theory is fighting for- and, in effect, belittles the danger of assuming one's preferences are neither moral nor immoral. For instance, a publically exposed breast is scandalous in our society, whereas in other cultures it is unremarkable. Objectively speaking, it is neither right nor wrong- there is no objective reason why either custom is better (Rachels, 2002: 562). "Many (but not all) our practices are merely peculiar to our society, it is easy to lose sight of that fact. In reminding us of it, the theory does a service" (Ibid).

Weaknesses of Conventionalism

Despite these positive virtues attached with ethical relativism, the theory has also grave and disastrous practical implications, which in turn, belittle its significance as a comprehensive ethical theory. Cultural tolerance, as antidote for ethnocentrism, indeed, backfires with cultural relativism. By elevating the virtue of tolerance, as an antidote for cultural arrogance, relativists would seem to be endorsing the objective existence of moral codes- at least one, that is, *tolerance*. How could a relativist make a persuasive argument to refute any sort of intolerant behavior, given that right and wrong are culturally defined? Tolerance is a moral concept, and by accepting it, relativists would seem to have endorsed the stance of moral objectivism that there are objective moral truths. How one would be compelled to have a tolerant behavior towards other cultures, provided that moral standards are nothing but merely cultural conventions. Suppose that society A doesn't have the moral principle related with tolerance, and, in effect, either accepts intolerance as something good or remains indifferent. How would, then, a relativist be able to claim that cultural tolerance is better than intolerance. "[F]rom a relativistic point of view, there is no more reason to be tolerant than to be intolerant, and neither stance is objectively morally better than the other" (Pojman, 2001:260). A relativist would not be able to persuade people to hold universally the virtue of tolerance, unless recognizing the existence of objective and culture transcendent moral standards, such as tolerance. Relativists would never be able to offer a basis for criticizing those who are intolerant.

Another difficulty associated with ethical relativism is that it undercuts the possibility of cultural inter comparison. According to the theory, right and wrong are determined by appealing to the customs' of one's society; as a result it would, then, completely shatter the possibility, in any way, to stamp out sterile elements from a culture. The upshot of ethical relativism is that it undermines any attempt to criticize less benign elements from a culture, for it denies the existence of culture transcendent objective moral standards. How can intercultural comparison and criticism possible if all moral standards and percepts are culturally rooted. If what is right and wrong is a matter of cultural acceptance, then there is little- or almost no- ground or basis to make intercultural comparison and moral criticism. In fact, its upshot is very detrimental. Hitler's genocidal actions, as long as they were culturally accepted, were as morally legitimate as Mather Teresa's work of mercy. "If conventional relativism is accepted racism, genocide of unpopular minorities, oppression of the poor, slavery, and even the advocacy of war for its own sake are equally as moral as their opposites" (Pojman,2001: 260). If we took cultural relativism seriously, we would have to admit that these social practices also are immune from criticism.

Another serious flaw imputed with cultural relativism is its inability to offer a clear conception and meaning about a culture or society. To put it in other words, a further difficulty imputed with cultural relativism is related with the meaning of a culture or society upon which the theory exclusively relies on. According to cultural relativism, right and wrong are determined by cultural standards. However, due to modern life – high level of social stratification and specialization – the theory is highly dubious to make a clear conception about society or community. A person might belong to more than one community at a time, and which often might happen to be conflicting and contradictory, as a result determining to which group the person belongs – to evaluate his\her action - would not easily be tenable. Suppose that a person may belong to two different cultures, that is, culture A and culture B at a time. And often the two cultures happen to be contradictory. And, hence, by which culture should the actions of the person be evaluated, that is, should the actions of the person be judged by culture A or culture B?

Suppose that someone might be a member of a certain religious community as well as member of the larger society, and in particular matters the two communities, to which the individual simultaneously belong, might uphold contradictory and conflicting values. As a member of a certain religious community the individual might espouse a value against abortion but which might be at odds with the value of the larger society, approves of abortion. How would a conventionalist resolve this inconsistency? Pojman (2001:263) rightly puts the flaw of conventionalism, especially with regard to the possibility of a person to be a member of different conflicting communities, as "[r]elativism would seem to tell us that where a person is a member of societies with conflicting moralities, he/she must be judged both wrong and not-wrong, whatever he/she does."

A relativist would seem to reply the objection by saying that the person, who belongs to different social groupings, may decide to which group he/she principally belongs. The nuisance with this option is that it seems to lead back to counterintuitive results (Ibid). By such principle a person may validate any morally reprehensible act, such as murder just by aligning himself to a community that approves the act, rather than the community that disapprove of it. If conventionalism were true, wouldn't one justify anything merely by forming a small subculture? How large must the group be to make up a legitimate subculture or society? Does it need ten or fifteen people? How about just three? (Ibid)

Relativism does have another serious negative implication, that is, it makes moral progress and reform deplorable. If conventional relativism were true, those individuals who are passionate to make moral reform or improve their society would seem to be treated as immoral. How does conventionalism consider the status of moral reformers, such as Jesus, Lincoln, Gandhi and Mandela, who had the courage to go against the tide of their respective cultural yardstick? In the past when slavery was the order of the day, defying the status quo, as what Lincoln vehemently did, would seem to have been treated as immoral and wrong. Similarly, Mandela, a visionary social and political reformer, spent much of his life time in fighting against racism and apartheid would seem to have been immoral if relativism were correct. In a word, Mandela was wrong in fighting racial discrimination and social and political injustice. Pojman (2001:261), however, describes the zeal of the moral reformer as follows:

Yet we normally feel just the opposite, that the reformer is the courageous innovator who is right, who has the truth, against the mindless majority. Sometimes the individual must stand alone with the truth, risking social censure and persecution…Yet if relativism is correct, the opposite is necessarily the case. Truth is with the crowd and error with the individual.

Conclusion

Ethical relativism is the doctrine that denies that there is a single moral standard that is universally applicable to all people at all times. Relativists deny that there exists only one moral code, law, principle, or standard. They insist that there are many moral codes, which take root in diverse social soils and environments. As the name implies, ethical relativists insist that any morality is relative to time, place and circumstances in which it occurs. The attraction of cultural relativism is not as much appealing as it seems to be on the surface, for it has serious practical disastrous implication without overlooking some of its virtues. Such problems include, the problem of defining a culture, problems related with the place of a reformer, the impossibility of moral criticism and argumentation.

In order to understand ethical relativism, one must first be aware that there is a difference between ethical absolutism and ethical objectivism. Ethical absolutism, which this article denounces, is the doctrine that there exists one and only one non-overridable moral code. The view which denies the existence of only one non- overridable moral code that could be applied at all times and place reflects the tenet of ethical objectivism. Absolutists maintain that this code applies for everyone, at all times, everywhere. What is a moral duty for me must also be a duty for you. What is a moral duty for an American must also be a moral duty for an Asian, African, European, and Aborigine. If euthanasia is wrong, it is wrong for everyone, at all times, everywhere. That a society may see nothing wrong with euthanasia or lying or cannibalism in no way affects the rightness or wrongness of such actions. Ethical objectivists do not necessarily claim that their interpretation of the absolute standard is the true and valid one. But they do insist that there is a true moral code and that is the same for all people.

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