

Supporting moral relativism

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



In Support of Moral Relativism: My topic is on moral relativism, and I am trying to argue that moral relativism is applicable and is required to explain the current phenomenon. First I would try to show how culture affects moral decisions, and that such shows the need for a relativistic explanation. I would propose a few arguments and analogies for the need of relativism, such as that in different situations the same moral rule may not apply. I would then try to see if there are any moral standards or rights that are deemed to be universal, and try to see if they can be relativistic. I would like to investigate on how we define the groups that the moral principles are relative to, and would like to show that relativism exists as a phenomenon no matter which group we define. Then, I would like to show that the moral standard of a group can be set by the consensus of the majority, who have large contributions to their cultural environment. [3] I would try to look at what would happen if relativism is taken to the extreme by defining individuals as those the moral principles are relative to, and from that, what degree of depth should we look at when we consider moral relativism, and if so whether morality beyond that certain depth is absolute and universal. For the first example, in Muslim countries, all female wear face veils as a cultural tradition. To the Muslims, this is totally acceptable within their own culture, but for us we would believe that it is an infringement of human right. In this case we have the tendency to impose our own cultural norms on the Muslims to refute such acts. But to the Muslim world the idea of not wearing face veils has never crossed their mind, and within their culture it is even wrong to uncover the face veils. It can easily be observed that there requires a justification of acts within a culture itself in different places and situations,

rather than across different cultures. [4] Similarly for morality, “killing and eating human beings” may be morally wrong for us, but to the cannibal tribes it is totally natural due to their exposure to their own culture. For us to impose our own moral considerations onto the cannibals is unfair to them, just as unfair as for them to impose their moral considerations on us. [1]

Thus, while we would resist being eaten by cannibals, we should not condemn their act of eating human beings as immoral merely on the ground that such act is immoral in our own culture. However one difficulty faced by moral relativism is how we could define the valid morality of a certain society or culture. In fact there are quite a number of disagreements within a culture on how the moral standard should be set. I believe that such disagreement is not an exclusive problem for moral relativism, but instead a problem for most ethical theories. The resolution I propose is to realize that the moral norms are in fact largely influenced by the cultural environment. Thus, it is appropriate to define the valid moral standard of a society based on the moral beliefs of the members of the society who had contributed collectively to their cultural environment. In other terms, how people should behave in a certain culture should be defined collectively by those people who sculpted the culture itself. For example, Sub-Saharan Africans have collectively defined their own unique culture in their own region, and generations of Sub-Saharan Africans are mutually under such cultural influence. What the Sub-Saharan Africans believe that the culture’s moral standard is for them would be the moral norm for them to follow. Following the above argument, in Sub-Saharan Africa where some people sacrifice children for worshipping their gods their acts are totally morally justified within their own culture, so it

would be wrong for us to judge them according to our own moral standards which are brewed in our own, separate culture. However this does not imply that we do not have the right to feel revulsion towards acts that we deem immoral, but rather it implies that we should not denounce it based solely on our own ethical considerations. One may immediately suggest the Nazi counter example, where genocide is thought to be morally justified in its culture under relativism principles. However it should be noted that the act of genocide reaches far beyond the German society and affects the Jews which are of a different culture. This act alone means that the Nazis have imposed their own moral considerations of killing Jews on the Jews who are not part of their culture. Thus even under relativism principles, genocide of the Jews is not morally justified. Then there arises a further question on whether there could be absolute moral statements, or whether that is the case that every moral statement could be relative. I believe that there is no absolute moral truth as different people would have different interpretations. In fact all moral statements can be relative as long as the conditions of such statements being relative are not extensively stated. In other words specifying the relativistic conditions of a moral statement extensively would be solely for defeating the purpose of the relativism theory and should be prevented. For a concrete example “killing a person” may not be absolutely ethically wrong, since whether it is justified to kill another person depends much on the situation, for example whether one is acting as self defense. If the moral statement is refined and specified at reducing a statement’s relativity, one could modify the statement into “killing a person while not acting as self defense”. Even by then whether the statement is ethical

depends on finer details of the situation, for example whether one is protecting other lives. By then one could still reduce the relativity of the statement with “killing a person neither acting as self defense nor protecting other lives”. This could go on forever until every condition that renders the statement relative is exhausted, which is theoretically impossible. Even if this could be practically achieved, it would seem pointless to win the debate over relativism with an extremely specified moral statement which has no significant implications. Also there seems to be a difficulty in defining a group to which the moral principles would be relative to. A person can in fact have multiple identities and belong to different groups at the same time. For example whether one can worship gods depends on the culture one is in. However Chinese Christians always face the dilemma of whether to worship their ancestors or not, as it is a Chinese custom to do so as to honor the deceased, while it is forbidden in Christian faith to worship other gods. Such conflict of identities renders it quite hard to determine which moral standards we should follow. One solution for me to propose is that we should realize that one cannot be mentally of two cultures at once when conflict arises. In other words, when a person is under the influence of two or more groups or cultures, it does not mean that the person would believe at the same time that God exists and it does not, simply because the different groups or cultures have different takes on the matter. The person, would in fact, under the influence of these conflicting cultures, formulate his own take on a statement. Thus, while the cultures themselves are conflicting, their contributive efforts in influencing a person would only result in the person to choose only one of either side. Then by then, we could

say that such person would be acting according to the moral standards set by the influence of both of the cultures, and in moral relativism this naturally solves the problem of defining a group. Thus, if we take the above example of the Chinese Christians, we take those who belong to both the Chinese culture and Christian culture to be under a single group for consideration of moral relativism. Then, these people would be justified to worship their ancestors if this single group decides that it is perfectly fine to do so without violating God's will. For the question of how do we define which moral statement is valid in this single group, I would propose to utilize the same reasoning from previous paragraphs, which means that those who collectively contribute to the culture of this single group should have their morality taken as the norms of the morality of the group. The above argument extends beyond two identities. For considering multiple identities, one may come across the identity of a person as an individual. If, for example, moral relativism is allowed at the individual level, then whatever the person believes as true could be morally justified. However, as I have pointed out in the Nazi example, under moral relativism it is not justified to impose one's moral justification onto others. Thus, even for defining the group to the individual level, his moral actions would only be confined to himself, and he is not justified to condemn or act against the moral considerations of others, which is basically what moral relativism requires. Therefore, whether defining relativism on a nation, a culture or on a group of people or even a person, their scope of action is reduced from one to the other until at the individual level even if he believes it is fine to kill another person he is not justified to do so to another group who disagrees. Therefore

in the end, there should be no limits as to how far could moral relativism apply, and there does not exist a certain depth where we could no longer define a smaller group of people. To conclude, moral relativism is a theory with reasonable applications. The moral standards to be set in a group should be defined by the culture of the group, and as the culture is shaped by the majority, their moral standards are taken as the valid standard of the entire group. The problem of conflicting moral standards is non-existent as conflicting cultures affects each person in those cultures as a group, and that each of these groups has its own moral justifications. There are no dilemmas in defining groups that a person is in, as a person who belongs to multiple groups does not contradict the intention of moral relativism. Moral relativism even allows definition of group to extremity to the level of the individual, and thus there does not exist absolute or universal morality. In all the idea moral relativism is not as flawed as most have thought. References: 1. Robin McKie, " How Neanderthals met a grisly fate: devoured by humans, " [[The Observer]] (ä" æœ^ 17, 2009), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/may/17/neanderthals-cannibalism-anthropological-sciences-journal>. 2. Chris Gowans, " Moral Relativism, " <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/>. 3. " Moral Relativism, " <http://www.moralrelativism.info/>. 4. Gilbert Harman, " Moral Relativism Defended, " The Philosophical Review 84, no. 1 (ä_œœ^ 1975): 3-22. 5. Steven Lukes, Moral Relativism: Big Ideas/Small Books (Picador, 2008).