

Moral and cultural relativism course work

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Moral and cultural relativism attempts to draw the relationship between the differences contained in moral judgments and cultural practices across diverse cultures. It supposes that what is right or wrong, or what is moral or not moral can only be determined through a subjective approach as what is moral or right to one person may not necessarily be so to the other. Allan Bloom in his book *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987) explains that an average American student is a moral relativist and believes that truth is relative. He further explains that such students believe that the truth cannot be objective or absolute is so self-evident that there need not be any further proof of it. Emerson (1841) describes moral relativism as a way of expressing radical individualism. According to Bloom, those who believe that truth is objective and thus require that others adhere to their accepted standards of truth are merely being intolerant. Such intolerant behavior, he explains, would curtail the virtue of openness. Bloom (1987) crowns the concept of moral relativism is encompassed in two main principles each of which seek to handle different aspects of culture and morality. These are truth value relativism and moral relativism.

The case in question puts to test the principle of moral relativism. The main premises of this school of thought is that there are no known universally accepted standards of morality and that what one does may be right according to his own beliefs concerning morality and nobody needs approve of it. Moral relativism goes hand in hand with a non-judgmental predisposition and as such, moral relativists purport to be non-judgmental though this is

subject to debate. However, moral positivism presents a great deal of challenges as its very principles tend to lead to a contradiction. For instance if imposing our own beliefs on others as far as morality is concerned is wrong, then would it be right to say that it is right to be amoral relativist and wrong not to be one? Would we then not be branded as judgmental? This brings us to the question of whether or not a moral relativist mother is in a position to tell her child that it is wrong to be judgmental. Should the child's judgmental mien be taken by the mother to be the child's perception of what is right and moral? Why should the mother, a moral relativist herself want to refute her child's behavior when that would definitely amount to her imposing her own beliefs on the child? What comes out clearly is that it is almost, if not absolutely, impossible not to be judgmental. The very act of choosing moral relativity over the other approaches to morality such as absolutism is judgmental (Pojman, 1995). It can therefore be said that the journey into moral relativism begins at an inevitable point of judgment and that the supposedly non-judgmental moral relativist is, unknowingly, tainted with an indelible mark of the judgmental character. This has also been the Achilles tendon of the proponents of moral relativism. The mother would therefore not hesitate to rebuke the child for being judgmental believing that it is important as amoral relativist not to be judgmental and in the process stray into the judgmental world of the absolutists without so realizing. Such is the mystery of contradiction in which moral relativism is shrouded. Strictly adhered to, moral relativism would amount to seemingly absurd suppositions. According to Moore, it would only be enough that one person thinks an act to be moral of it to be taken as so. Slavery would therefore be

taken to be moral if one thought or it was so. He illustrates that under moral relativism, the strong condemnation of racial segregation by Martin Luther King Jr. as immoral would bear no more weight than the assertion by the most aggressive segregationists that it was moral. It is quite telling that some of the strongest proponents of moral relativism are known to pass judgments on issues of the politically correct. A moral relativist is supposed to approve of Adolf Hitler's killing of over six million Jewish arguing that according to Hitler's beliefs, this could have been moral yet most of them don't. (Ebenstein, 59)

Concerning the second case where Mr. Smith wants to cut down a rain forest, a most challenging scenario is presented to the moral relativist. The average moral relativist is likely to condemn Mr. Smith's intended action though they are supposed to, in line with the tenets of moral relativity, dismiss it as right as conforms to his beliefs on morality. It raises many questions why and probably leads to the conclusion that perhaps an absolute standard moral relativity does not exist. It is this line that Ruth Benedict in his book *Patterns of Culture* (1934) asserts that we recognize morality as differing in every society. That it is no longer treated as a first principle and that it is merely a convenient term for socially impoverished societies.

It is evident that the foundations of moral relativism are not firm enough to stand the test of critical reasoning. A moral relativist often finds themselves in situations that require them to be judgmental contrary to the dictates of their school of thought. As a result, moral absolutism is fast gaining ground. However, cultural relativism has proved most successful as cultural practices are largely defined by the environments in which we live. This is

demonstrated by practices of the Aztecs and the Kukukuku tribes of Mexico and Papua New Guinea respectively in Alvin J Schmidt (1997).

RESPONSE TO LASSEK'S ESSAY

Reading Lassek's essay, one gets the impression that he clearly refuses to embrace the concept of moral relativity. He is however careful not to fall for the moral absolutist position. His suggestion that our decisions on issues of morality should be informed by reasonable sensitivity to others around us as well as the rights conferred to us under the First Amendment is aimed at striking a balance between moral and cultural relativism and absolutism. He clearly demonstrates this by coming out strongly against Emerson who claims that " what is right is only what an individual thinks is right". He also gives an example of Hitler who killed nearly six million Jews. His point of view could not have been better demonstrated. (Knight, 34)

RESPONSE TO McDONNELI'S ESSAY

McDonnell refutes the concept of moral relativism. He asserts that the approach does not work nor is it acceptable in the society. He cites Christina Hoff Sommers explanation that the declaration of Independence meant that every individual had the right to liberty, life and happiness. In his opinion, this would only be possible if the principle moral relativism was dispensed of in the society. He explains that moral relativism would allow individuals to take part in activities that would interfere with the rights of others around him. He praises absolutism and explains that even in an environment where it is practiced, individuals still have the freedom to reasonably do what they wish, contrary to what proponents of moral relativism think.

Works cited

William Ebenstein Introduction to Political Thinkers. Wadsworth Group. 2002.

Kelvin Knight, Aristotelian Philosophy, . London: Polity Press, 2007, passim.