Ethical Relativism: An Introduction

H. Gene Blocker

Ethical relativism is the doctrine that there is no one universally valid moral code applicable to all peoples at all times in all places, that what is morally correct in one culture (for one social group at a particular time and place) is not necessarily right for another culture (another social group at a different time and place). This is not simply one more moral theory among others, but the repudiation of all moral theories; that is, the repudiation of ethics in general. How so? Ethics as a branch of moral philosophy is the search and justification for a universally valid objective code of morality. Philosophical ethics, in other words, presupposes (however difficult it may actually be to find and convince others of it) ethical absolutism, the very opposite of ethical relativism. Ethical relativism holds that there is no such universally objective moral standard, from which it follows that ethics, as defined above, is impossible.

Most philosophers reject ethical relativism, and that means that they reject the arguments which are alleged to support the theory. Since the evidence presented in support of ethical relativism is the empirical evidence gathered by anthropologists of the diversity of moral practices and beliefs among different social groups in the world, the debate turns on the strength or weakness of this empirical evidence to prove or disprove ethical relativism. Does the fact that different social groups have different moral practices and beliefs imply that each of these sets of moral standards is morally correct for these different groups?

Although it has been generally known for several thousand years that different social groups supported different moral practices and beliefs, this did not become the object of scientific study until the rise of anthropology at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. In the 1920s when students of Franz Boas began for the first time to leave the comfort of university libraries and spend months and even years conducting empirical research “in the field” among neolithic (New Stone Age) peoples in
South America, Africa, Australia, and Polynesia, anthropology began to be more widely appreciated. Popular books written by Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict described how different so-called “primitive” peoples were from us, the supposedly more “civilized” regarding morals, especially sexual morality. Whereas we strongly discouraged premarital sexual intercourse, for example, this was considered a harmless part of growing up in other cultures.

Anthropology presented itself to the world as a morally neutral, empirical science. Nonetheless, it was difficult in practice to divorce anthropology entirely from the moral and political context of the times. At the end of the nineteenth century two-thirds of the world was under European colonial domination (India, most of Africa, Indonesia, the Polynesian islands, and earlier, all of the Americas). Part of the justification for colonialism was the perceived moral and cultural superiority of European culture over the “primitive,” “savage” “barbarity” of the colonized peoples. Many of the early anthropologists, particularly the students of Franz Boas, opposed this view as “ethnocentric” or “Eurocentric,” and vigorously reacted against it. Other cultures were just as successful as ours in providing effective ways of coping in the world, they argued, and where their moral codes were different from ours, they were just different—not inferior. No one has the right, they held, to belittle another culture as inferior to one’s own. Each is just as valid in its own sphere as any other. Morality is therefore culturally relative.

In the readings which follow there are two main questions to consider. First, what are the facts—how different are the moral practices and beliefs of different social groups? And second, does cultural diversity prove ethical relativism or by the same token, does cultural uniformity prove ethical absolutism?

Suggested Further Reading


