Relativism

Is beauty in the eye of the beholder? Doubtless the most familiar question in the field of aesthetics is whether aesthetic values such as beauty are ‘real’ – inherent, objective – properties of the things to which they are ascribed. Or are such values, rather, inextricably tied to, or dependent on, the judgments and attitudes of the humans who do the ascribing? The assumption of moral relativism, put simply, is that the second answer is the right one and that what goes for aesthetics goes for ethics too.

To a significant degree, the relativist’s proposal is that we treat moral judgments as if they were aesthetic ones. If you say you like oysters and I do not, we agree to differ. In such a case it doesn’t make sense to say that one or other of us is right or wrong; and it would seem absurd for me to try to persuade you to stop liking oysters or to criticize you for liking them.

In just the same way, the relativist argues, if a particular social group or community approves of, say, infanticide, it is not something that they can be wrong about – it is morally right for them. And it would not be appropriate for others to criticize them or to try to persuade them to change their minds, because there is no neutral standpoint from which to do so. According to this view, then, no moral truth – no moral principle or belief – is ‘really’ right or wrong; it can be considered so only from the perspective of a particular culture, society or historical period.

**Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6th century</th>
<th>5th century</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>According to Herodotus, Darius the Great of Persia explores the idea of cultural relativism</td>
<td>The case for moral relativism is made by Protagoras and other Greek sophists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CUSTOM IS KING

One of the obvious attractions of relativism is that it fits in well with the great diversity of moral beliefs that exist today and have existed at different times and places in the past. This point has long been recognized. The Greek
historian Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BC, tells the story of a party of
Greeks at the court of Darius, king of Persia, who are appalled at the suggestion
that they should eat the dead bodies of their fathers; they are then confronted
with members of a tribe, the Callatians, who follow just such a practice, only to discover that the Callatians are no less disgusted by the Greek habit of burning their dead. Noting that morality is basically a matter of convention,
the historian then quotes with approval the poet Findar’s saying: ‘Custom is king of all.’

DISAGREEING ABOUT AGREEING TO DISAGREE

One problem with the relativist’s treatment of moral judgments as if they were aesthetic ones is that it seems to rule out disagreement over moral values: there is apparently no point arguing the rights and wrongs of either eating oysters or infanticide. Yet in reality our lives are full of such argument and debate: we often take strong positions on ethical matters, such as abortion and capital punishment, and, both individually and as a society, we often change our minds over time. The out-and-out relativist would have to say not only that different things are right for different people but that the same things are right for the same people at one time but not at another. Can the relativist really live with the conclusion that practices such as enslaving people or burning heretics are wrong now but were right in the past, because earlier cultures deemed them so?

Proponents of relativism sometimes attempt to turn its failure to take serious account of ordinary aspects of our moral lives to their advantage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1960s</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relativist ideas fuel the growth of ‘anything goes’ libertarianism</td>
<td>Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger decry the ‘dictatorship of relativism’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The dictatorship of relativism

Ideologically opposed to relativism is absolutism, the view that there are certain moral principles that should never be violated, certain actions that are always wrong. Notably absolutist, for example, are religious moralities, which accordingly appear to be especially threatened by relativist ideas. Speaking in 2005, shortly before he became Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger delivered a sermon in which he expressed his fears that the certainty of faith, which 'opens us up to all that is good and gives us the knowledge to judge true from false', was being usurped by relativism – a corrosive belief that any point of view is as good as another and hence that it is impossible to reach absolute truth on any matter. The result, he believed, was 'a dictatorship of relativism' – a tyranny that encouraged a false and anarchic sense of freedom and precipitated a descent into moral, and especially sexual, licentiousness.

Perhaps, they argue, we should not be so judgmental of other cultures; we should be more tolerant, open-minded and sensitive to other customs and practices. In short, we should live and let live. But this really won't do. For it is only the allegedly intolerant non-relativist who can logically hold up tolerance and cultural sensitivity as virtues that we should all embrace. From the relativist perspective, of course, tolerance is just another value about which different cultures or societies should agree to disagree.

IF ANYTHING GOES...

From the common but facile judgment that 'it's all relative', it is sometimes inferred that 'anything goes', and in recent decades this has become the slogan of a kind of libertarianism that has set itself against all kinds of traditional or reactionary forces in society, culture and religion. However, the kind of incoherence that afflicts the tolerant relativist quickly overwhelms these more extreme versions of relativism.

Radical relativism is the view that all claims – moral and everything else – are relative. So is the claim that all claims are relative itself relative? Well, it has to be, to avoid self-contradiction; but if it is, it means that my claim that all claims are absolute is true for me. So, for instance, relativists cannot say that it is always wrong to criticize the cultural arrangements of other societies, as it may be right for me to do so. In general, relativists cannot consistently maintain the validity of their own position.
PALATABLE IN MODERATION

The earliest names associated with moral relativism are the sophists of classical Greece – the travelling philosophers and teachers, such as Thrasymanchus and Protagoras, who claimed (according to Plato) that it was due to human convention, not to the facts of nature, that things were good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust. The inconsistencies of Protagoras’ relativism are deftly exposed by the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues, but in fact Protagoras seems to have adopted a moderate position, arguing that there must be some rules in place (albeit based on convention) to ensure that society can function tolerably.

Protagoras’ position is a recognition that we have to agree on something, to have some common ground, in order to live together as social beings. This is precisely the common ground that is undermined by radical relativism. But in reality, as anthropology has shown, while there may be innumerable differences in detail, many core values are shared by virtually all cultures, past and present: accepted rules against unlawful killing, for instance, without which social living would be impossible; and rules against promise-breaking, without which cooperation would be impossible. A mild dose of relativism, then, may be a healthy corrective to cultural insularity or bigotry. Heavy doses, however, are toxic, inducing something close to moral nihilism.

The condensed idea
Morality by majority vote?