

What Is Relativism?
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In a best-selling book from a few years ago, a college teacher remarked,

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though you were calling into question $2+2=4$.¹

Many teachers would echo this observation. However, philosophers know that relativism is a frequently misunderstood doctrine. In other words, people often describe their position as "relativism" when it is really something quite different, or (worse yet) people conflate relativism with some other doctrine, so that they end up holding some self-contradictory combination of views. As a consequence of these facts, people also frequently give arguments that they think support relativism, but that really support some very different position. Therefore, what I want to do in this paper is to explain clearly what relativism is and identify some other positions with which ethical relativism is often confused. This will put you in a better position to understand what relativism is, what the arguments for and against it are, and whether you believe in some form of it.

¹ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 25. Although I agree with this particular comment, I do not agree with everything Professor Bloom says in this book.

1. Isn't Ethical Relativism Obviously True?

Perhaps you are one of those who assume that ethical relativism is true, and are surprised that any argument is needed in defense of it. If so, I ask you to consider the following facts. I have studied the history of Western thought, and based on my study, I can tell you the following: There have been a few ethical relativists in the Western tradition. One noteworthy example is Protagoras, a Greek Sophist who is famous for having said, "Humans are the measure of all things." Historians argue about what exactly Protagoras meant by that claim, but one common view is that Protagoras was defending a kind of relativism. However, historically speaking, Protagoras is a rare exception in the Western tradition. In fact, almost no one in the Western intellectual tradition has been a relativist. The fact that almost none of the great philosophers, poets, and religious leaders of the West for over two millennia have been relativists should make us pause and think a moment.

Some people will not be surprised by this fact. They are aware that relativism is a rare doctrine in the Western tradition, but they think that this is precisely the problem with the Western tradition. Such people advocate adopting relativism as a way of overthrowing the Western tradition. But consider another fact. I have also studied several non-Western traditions. No one is an expert in every non-Western culture. However, I have studied the Chinese tradition in depth, and the Japanese, Korean and Indian philosophical traditions to a lesser extent. Based on that study, I can tell you that, if anything, relativism is even less common in these non-Western traditions than it is in the West. As Gandhi said, "Truth does not become error just because it is widely believed, nor does error become truth for the same reason." Consequently, if you believe in relativism, you are disagreeing with the major thinkers of not just the Western tradition, but of at least several major non-Western traditions as well.

Of course, it is fine to disagree with people. And it is possible for even great thinkers to be wrong. (Most of a philosophy class is spent discussing where we disagree with great thinkers!) But what the preceding facts should demonstrate conclusively is the following: it is not obvious that relativism is true, because if it were obvious, there would not have been so few relativists among the great thinkers of so many traditions. Consequently, if relativism is true, this must be shown by means of philosophical argument, and not just assumed, or taken to be obvious.

2. What Is Relativism?

There are actually a variety of different kinds of relativism. Speaking at the most general level, relativism is the doctrine that a claim is true or false only in relation to some particular viewpoint or perspective. Specific kinds of relativism may be distinguished according to (1) which kinds of claims the doctrine of relativism applies to, and (2) which viewpoint or perspective these claims are relative to.

Relativism applied to ethical claims is called, sensibly enough, "ethical relativism." Ethical relativism is also known as "moral relativism." (In addition, some people refer to this doctrine as "meta-ethical relativism," to distinguish it from "normative moral relativism," which I shall discuss below.) *Ethical relativism* is the doctrine that all ethical claims are true or false only in relation to some particular viewpoint or perspective. Ethical claims are the ones that involve evaluations of some kind. So if I say, "You *ought* to do such-and-such," or "It would be *wrong* to do such-and-such," or "So-and-so is a *kind* person," or "It would be *bad* if such-and-such happened," then I am making an ethical or evaluative claim. Let's look at an example. Consider a claim like, "Nazism is wrong." If we ask whether this claim is true or false, an ethical relativist, if she is being careful, will say that we cannot say that the statement is true or false until we specify a perspective from which we can evaluate that claim. Relative to the

perspective of Adolph Hitler, Nazism is right. Relative to my perspective (and, I hope, your perspective) Nazism is wrong.

I want to head off a possible misunderstanding here. The ethical relativist is not asserting only that Hitler *believed* that Nazism is right, while you and I *believe* that Nazism is wrong. Rather, the ethical relativist is asserting that Nazism really is right, relative to Hitler's perspective, and that it really is wrong, relative to your and my viewpoints. But there is no fact of the matter about whether Nazism is wrong, independent of particular viewpoints or perspectives.

Ethical relativism takes one group of claims that humans make (the ethical or evaluative ones), and says that these claims are true or false only relative to some perspective or viewpoint. But there are many other kinds of claims that we make: " $2+2=4$," " $e=mc^2$," "Lincoln was the sixteenth President of the U.S.A.," etc. *Cognitive relativism* expands the relativist doctrine to encompass not just evaluative claims, but also claims that are purely descriptive, or non-evaluative. Cognitive relativism is the doctrine that all claims are true or false only in relation to some particular viewpoint or perspective. For example, consider the paper you are holding in your hands. A contemporary physicist would say that this paper is made mostly out of wood pulp, which is mostly made of carbon atoms. In contrast, a pre-modern Aristotelian physicist -- that is, a pre-modern scientist who accepted the physics of Aristotle -- would say that there are four basic elements that compose things in the mundane world: earth, water, fire, and air. Thus, the Aristotelian physicist would believe that the paper you are holding is made out of some combination of earth, water, fire, and air. So the modern physicist and the Aristotelian physicist *believe* different things. But the cognitive relativist goes beyond that, and asserts that, relative to the perspective of the modern physicist, the paper really *is* made out of mostly carbon atoms, and -- at the same time -- the paper really *is* made out of the basic elements of earth, water, fire, and air, relative to the perspective of the Aristotelian physicist. In other words, there is no fact of the matter, independent of perspective, about what this particular piece of

paper is made of. Even a descriptive claim like, "This piece of paper is made mostly of carbon atoms" is true or false only relative to some particular viewpoint or perspective.

So far, we have seen that relativism can apply to evaluative claims (ethical relativism) or to claims in general, including purely descriptive ones (cognitive relativism). Now, we will look at which *viewpoints* these claims can be relative to. Basically, a claim can be relative to the viewpoint of a particular culture, or a particular individual. *Cultural relativism* is the doctrine that a claim is true or false only relative to the perspective or viewpoint of a given culture. *Subjectivism* is the doctrine that a claim is true or false only relative to the perspective or viewpoint of a given person. Combining this with our earlier distinction, we get four possibilities:

| | Cultural | Subjective |
|-----------|----------|------------|
| Ethical | A | B |
| Cognitive | C | D |

So one can advocate either cultural ethical relativism (A), or subjective ethical relativism (B), and one can advocate either cultural cognitive relativism (C), or subjective cognitive relativism (D). For instance, an ethical subjectivist (B) holds that ethical claims (e.g., "murder is wrong") are true or false only in relation to each individual person's perspective (e.g., Hitler's or Gandhi's), while a cognitive cultural relativist (C) holds that claims in general (e.g., "an object in motion will tend to remain in motion unless acted on by some force") are true or false only in relation to the viewpoint of a particular culture (e.g., the culture of contemporary physicists, or the culture of medieval Aristotelian physicists).

The denial of relativism is called either "*objectivism*" or "*realism*." The ethical realist believes that there are evaluative claims that are true independently of

individual or cultural perspective (like "citizens ought to be able to criticize their own governments"). The cognitive realist holds that there are non-evaluative claims that are true independently of what any individual or culture thinks. (For example, a scientific realist would say that it has always been true that $e=mc^2$, although no one knew it before Einstein discovered this fact.)²

3. Why Are Almost No Philosophers Cognitive Relativists?

About 2,400 years ago, Plato presented what almost all philosophers have since regarded as a definitive refutation of cognitive relativism. Plato argued (in response to Protagoras) that cognitive relativism is self-contradictory. In order to see why, consider what happens when we apply the doctrine of cognitive relativism to itself. In other words, is the doctrine of cognitive relativism itself only relatively true? Think for a moment about how you would answer this question, and whether your answer is defensible.³

Either way you answer the question seems to land you in problems. Let's look at two brief dialogues to illustrate why.

Dialogue One

A: "Is cognitive relativism itself objectively true, or only true relative to a perspective?"

B: "Cognitive relativism is objectively true."

² "Objectivism," written with a capital "O," is also a name for the philosophy of Ayn Rand, but I am not using the term "objectivism" in that sense in this paper.

³ An objection like this was first formulated by Plato in his dialogue, the *Theatetus* (Stephanus 170e ff.). (There was a famous edition of Plato's dialogue edited by a man whose Latin name was "Stephanus." Almost all translations of Plato give the Stephanus pagination in the margin, so that you can locate the same passage in any of them.)

A: "You have contradicted yourself, because cognitive relativism says that all doctrines are only true relative to some perspective, but you just claimed that cognitive relativism itself is true objectively."

B: "Cognitive relativism is the one exception to relativism."

A: "That seems ad hoc. What is so special about the doctrine of cognitive relativism that makes it the one, unique doctrine that is immune from relativism? Whatever reason you have for believing in cognitive relativism in the first place, why does that reason apply to every other claim, but not to cognitive relativism itself?"

Dialogue Two

A: "Is cognitive relativism itself objectively true, or only true relative to a perspective?"

B: "Cognitive relativism is only true relative to a perspective."

A: "My perspective is that cognitive relativism is *objectively false*. Is my perspective true?"

B: "Of course. If cognitive relativism is only relatively true, then it must also be false relative to some perspective."

A: "You have contradicted yourself, because you have said that cognitive relativism is both true and false."

B: "No, I have not contradicted myself. Cognitive relativism is *relatively* true, and *objectively* false."

A: "That doesn't make any sense. 'Objectively' means 'not relatively.' If cognitive relativism is objectively false, that just means that it is false from every

perspective. So you have admitted that, even relative to your own perspective, cognitive relativism is false."

Here's another way of seeing the problem with cognitive relativism. However you formulate it, cognitive relativism is a perspective about the nature of other perspectives. (Cognitive relativism is the perspective that claims are true or false only relative to a perspective.) But what perspective does cognitive relativism itself occupy? Where does the cognitive relativist "stand" when he makes his claim? The only perspective from which you could assert cognitive relativism would be a perspective "above" and "outside" all other perspectives. In order to assert his own doctrine, the cognitive relativist has to (whether he likes it or not) take a "God's eye view" of all the other perspectives, and pass judgment on them. ("And I said unto them, your views are all relative.") But then the cognitive relativist has to assume that there is an objective point of view in order to deny that there is one. And this is just self-contradictory.

This is all a little abstract, so let's try to make it more concrete. I'm going to sketch a (very oversimplified) version of the philosophy of Marx. Enlightenment-era philosopher John Locke claimed to be searching for the truth about the foundations and limits of governmental authority, and he also claimed to have discovered some truths, such as the right to private property. However, Marx argues that all "culture" (including philosophy, art and law) is an expression of the interests of the social class of which a person is a member. So, according to Marx, Locke was not objectively investigating the truths about human rights. Rather, Locke was defending the interests of the social class of which he was a member, the bourgeoisie. The power of the bourgeoisie came from owning and accumulating wealth, so Locke (surprise, surprise) "discovered" a right to own and accumulate wealth. Now, Marx is probably on to something here. It would be naive, I think, to deny that economic interests play a role in shaping law, philosophy and even art. However, if one takes Marx's view to the extreme, it would seem to be a sort of cognitive relativism, according to which all claims are

true or false only relative to the perspective of the social class who makes them. But then we naturally ask: From what perspective does Marx make *his* claims? It certainly sounds as if Marx is describing the way he thinks the world *really* is. Marx seems to be saying, "Locke might believe that he was dispassionately discovering the right to private property, but *as a matter of fact* he was just expressing the interests of his social class." As soon as we examine this claim closely, we realize that it assumes there *is* an objective point of view from which we can see the world. And (surprise, surprise again!) Marx thinks it is his own perspective that is the objective one.

Despite its problems, there are some philosophers who try to defend cognitive relativism, such as Nelson Goodman in his *Ways of Worldmaking*. In addition, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has been read as a defense of cognitive relativism. However, Kuhn himself later argued that this was a misreading of his work, and most philosophers agree that neither Goodman nor anyone else has succeeded in giving a coherent cognitive relativist position.⁴

There are a number of very smart philosophers who advocate *ethical* relativism, though. (And there are equally smart ones who advocate ethical objectivism.) Recall that, while cognitive relativism says that *all* claims are true or false only relative to a perspective, ethical relativism says that only *ethical* claims are true or false relative to a perspective. Why are there philosophers who advocate ethical relativism when cognitive relativism has been definitively refuted? It turns out that *Plato's refutation of cognitive relativism cannot be applied to ethical relativism*. Ethical relativism is not self-contradictory. (Ethical relativism may be

⁴ See Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), and Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), especially chapters X and XII and the Postscript, sections 5-6.

false, but it is not false because it is self-contradictory.) If you can figure out why, you will have a good understanding of both cognitive and ethical relativism.

4. What Ethical Relativism Is Not or Non Sequiturs for Ethical Relativism

Philosophically, an argument consists of premises which are supposed to provide evidence for a conclusion. The conclusion is what you are trying to convince your audience is true, and the premises are things you think they already believe are true, and which somehow give us a good reason to believe that the conclusion is true. "Non sequitur" (nawn SEK-kwi-ter) is the name of the philosophical error of offering premises which do not logically support the conclusion at all. In other words, if your argument is a non-sequitur, whether the premises are true or not, they provide no evidence for accepting the conclusion, because the conclusion is not logically related to the premises.

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, relativism is often confused with other doctrines. Consequently, people often offer what they think are arguments in favor of ethical relativism, but which are really arguments in favor of some other position. Arguments like these are "non sequiturs." In this section, we are going to examine some examples of this sort of non sequitur, because it will help us to identify some bad arguments for ethical relativism, and also because we will understand ethical relativism better by understanding what it is not.

Ethical Relativism Does Not Follow from Unprovability

"Ethical relativism is true because we cannot prove what is right and wrong."

This is probably the most common argument that I hear in favor of ethical relativism. You might be surprised to learn that it is almost universally regarded as an incredibly bad argument by philosophers. A large part of the problem is

the word "prove." What does it mean here? I suspect that by "prove" people mean "convince everyone." But if that is what you mean by "prove," then you can prove almost nothing. Can one "prove" that evolutionary theory is true? One can certainly give evidence in favor of it. Personally, I am convinced by that evidence, and so are almost all contemporary biologists. But many people (including some with college or even graduate degrees) reject evolutionary theory in favor of Creationism or "Intelligent Design." In fact, according to public opinion polls, a majority of Americans *reject* evolutionary theory. Since we cannot "prove" evolutionary theory to everyone, does this mean that biology is only relatively true, or is only a matter of opinion? It seems hard to believe that it is. Either humans evolved from other animals as a result of random mutations and natural selection or we did not. So if "prove" means "convince everyone," then the fact that you cannot prove something does not show that it is only relatively true.

Ethical Relativism Is Not Moral Isolationism

"Ethical relativism is true because we have no right to pass judgment on other cultures."

The conclusion here is that ethical relativism is true. The premise, which is supposed to provide evidence for the truth of the conclusion, is that we have no right to pass judgment on other cultures. Does the premise actually provide evidence for the conclusion? No, this is actually another non sequitur. Why? The problem with the argument above is that the truth of its premise is perfectly consistent with the denial of ethical relativism. In order to see why, ask yourself the following question: Could an ethical realist (or an ethical objectivist) agree with the premise that we have no right to pass judgment on other cultures? Surely she could. Indeed, an ethical realist could say that it is an objective matter of fact that we have no right to pass judgment on other cultures. But recall that ethical realism denies the truth of ethical relativism. So the premise in the above

argument does not logically imply the conclusion that ethical relativism is true, because the premise is equally consistent with ethical relativism being false. Another way of seeing the problem with the argument is to notice that the premise, "We have no right to pass judgment on other cultures," is an ethical claim. However, ethical relativism itself is not an ethical claim. Ethical relativism is a claim about the nature of ethical claims. So the premise and the conclusion here are really about different topics altogether.

The premise of this argument actually expresses moral isolationism, a doctrine very different from ethical relativism. Moral isolationism is the doctrine that one ought not make ethical judgments about individuals or practices in any culture other than one's own. The philosopher Mary Midgley coined this label. (Some other philosophers call this "normative moral relativism.") Midgley presents some strong arguments against moral isolationism in a famous essay, "Trying Out One's New Sword." Midgley agrees that we should not pass judgments on other cultures glibly, or if we are uninformed. But, she asks, why can't we judge other cultures if we are informed and open-minded about their practices? In addition, Midgley suggests that, given the increasing interactions and exchanges among cultures, it is impossible to live up to moral isolationism. Practically speaking, we are forced to make judgments about other cultures all the time. (For example, how can I decide whether I support increasing trade with the People's Republic of China unless I make a judgment about whether trade with the West will make the Chinese government morally better or worse?)⁵

We saw above that moral isolationism does not logically imply ethical relativism. Notice also that ethical relativism does not, by itself, imply moral isolationism.

⁵ This was originally published in Midgley's *Heart and Mind*, but it has been reprinted many times, such as in Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers, eds., *Vice & Virtue in Everyday Life*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1993), pp. 174-180.

According to subjectivism, for example, moral isolationism is true relative to the people who accept that claim, but false relative to the people who reject that claim. If I am a subjectivist, I could think that we have no right to pass judgment on other cultures, but I could also (while still being a subjectivist) think that we do have a right to pass judgment on other cultures. So *relativism does not imply that you cannot pass judgment on other cultures.*

Ethical Relativism Is Not Required by Tolerance

"Ethical relativism is true because we have no right to interfere in the lives of others, even if we disapprove of what they are doing."

Here the premise that is supposed to support ethical relativism is that we have no right to interfere in the lives of others. There are at least two problems with this argument. First, if you think about it, I think you'll agree that the premise is not very plausible. Most of us, anyway, think that we do have a right to interfere in the lives of others, at least some of the time. Typically, we think that we have a right to interfere in the lives of others if their actions have serious consequences for the rest of us. For example, we require drivers to get insurance, because it potentially affects others if they have an accident and are uninsured. And we have zoning laws, so that your next door neighbor cannot turn his house into a hog-rendering plant, with all the associated stench. So the premise will have to be modified to be plausible:

"Ethical relativism is true because we have no right to interfere in the lives of others, even if we disapprove of their actions, so long as their actions do not have serious negative consequences for the rest of us."

Even this version of the argument is a little problematic, because it is vague what counts as "serious consequences." But there is a more important problem with this argument: it is a non sequitur. Even if the premise is true, it provides no evidence for the conclusion. You can probably see why for yourself if you

compare it with the previous argument. Think of it like this. An ethical objectivist could just as easily believe that we have no right to interfere in the lives of others as could an ethical relativist. Indeed, *an ethical objectivist could say that it is an objective matter of fact that we have no right to interfere in the lives of others.*

The doctrine expressed by the premise of this argument is liberalism. Liberalism is the doctrine that one ought not interfere in certain classes of actions of others, regardless of whether one disapproves of them. (The "Prime Directive" on Star Trek is an expression of liberalism.) As we have seen, this is different from ethical relativism, but at first it might not seem all that different from moral isolationism. There is an important difference, though. Moral isolationism is the doctrine that we ought not pass judgment on others (if they are from cultures other than our own), while liberalism allows us to pass judgment on others, but asserts that (at least in certain cases) we ought not interfere in their actions.⁶

Notice, finally that ethical relativism does not entail liberalism, any more than liberalism entails ethical relativism. A cultural ethical relativist, for example, would say that, relative to the culture of Nazi Germany, it is false that we should not interfere in the actions of others if we disapprove of them. *So relativism is perfectly consistent with being intolerant, and objectivism is completely consistent with being tolerant.*

5. Ethical Relativism and Error

⁶ In contemporary U.S. political discourse, "liberal" is often used to mean "left of the political center." However, properly speaking, liberalism may be associated with either left or right wing doctrines. For example, U.S. Republicans typically think that the "certain classes of actions" with which one may not interfere include individual and corporate decisions about spending and investing money, while U.S. Democrats typically think that the "certain classes of actions" include choices of personal lifestyle.

Another common misconception is the belief that, if ethical relativism is true, one cannot be mistaken, or one cannot argue productively about ethics. Neither of these consequences follow. Consider an analogy. Are the rules of Major League Baseball objectively true or only relatively true? If they were objectively true, that would mean there is some fact about the universe – independent of human rules, opinions and practices – that makes it true that four balls is an automatic walk to first base. Is there? Would humans be mistaken if they had decided that three balls makes a walk, or five? Presumably not. The rules of Major League Baseball are true only relative to the official rulebook. In general, rules of games are good examples of something that is relative to a culture (the culture of those who play that particular game).

Now, can anyone be mistaken about the rules of baseball? Of course! Even though the rules of baseball are ultimately relative, one can still be mistaken about them in at least two ways. One might be in error about a matter of fact that determines how to apply a rule, or one might be in error about what the rules are and imply. For example, we all know that there is lots of disagreement about whether umpires correctly call "safe" or "out." This is error regarding a matter of fact (did the runner touch home plate before the catcher caught the ball and touched home plate?) that determines how to apply the rule.

The ethical relativist can (and indeed must) acknowledge the possibility of similar kinds of error. Even if ethics is ultimately relative to cultural or subjective opinion, one might be in error about relevant facts, or about the implications of the rules one does accept. Suppose that, relative to my perspective, stealing is wrong. I think I am entitled to pick up *this* cell phone and walk out with it. However, I am in error, because I think that this cell phone is mine, when in fact it is yours. This is a trivial example, but there are more serious ones. Suppose I shoot an intruder in my home. It is tragic if the intruder is an innocent person, but it is ethically and criminally *wrong* if I was careless in opening fire when I could not see my target, and was not sure that I was in imminent danger. Even if the rules

"do not kill the innocent" and "exercise caution in the use of deadly force" are only relatively true, I can violate them. Likewise, I can be mistaken about the implications of my own rules. Suppose I think that stealing is wrong, but I think nothing of walking off with office supplies, which I use for my personal projects at home. What I am doing counts as stealing, even by my own standards, and I am in error in thinking that it does not.

In short, even if ethical relativism is true, this does not mean that one cannot be mistaken about ethical matters, or that there is no point in arguing about what is right and wrong.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explained the variety of types of relativism, including cultural vs. subjective, and ethical vs. cognitive. We have seen that cognitive relativism (whether cultural or subjective) is incoherent, because it has to adopt an objective point of view in order to assert that there is no objective point of view. Ethical relativism is not incoherent, but some of the most common arguments for it are demonstrably non sequiturs. You cannot prove ethical truths to everyone, but this does not entail that ethics is relative, because there are many objective things that you cannot prove to everyone either. Ethical relativism does not entail that we cannot pass judgment on other cultures, nor does it imply that we ought to be tolerant. (After all, it might be true, relative to us, that we should be intolerant.) On the other hand, the ethical realist can believe that, as an objective matter of fact, we ought to be tolerant. Finally, we saw that even if ethical relativism is true, it is possible to be mistaken about ethics. We might be mistaken about matters of fact that determine how to apply the ethical rules that we or our culture accept, or we might be mistaken about the implications of our ethical rules.

It is still possible to defend ethical relativism, but I hope you now have a better sense for what it is, and why it is harder to defend than you might have guessed at first.