World-Wide Ethics

Chapter Two

Cultural Relativism

The explanation of correct moral principles provided by the theory individual subjectivism seems unsatisfactory for several reasons. One of these is that individual subjectivism is non-social. In this theory, whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, depends wholly upon individuals’ opinions or feelings. But some fairly obvious features of morality rest on something larger than individuals’ beliefs.

Our rights, for example, seem not to depend on personal opinions. At least we have good reason to hope they do not. For if they do, then our beliefs or feelings that we have familiar rights like “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” need not be taken seriously by anyone whose opinions may differ from ours. The very idea of having a right to something means, after all, that others are wrong to interfere with our exercising our rights. The system of our rights is for this reason social, rather than individual.

To most people, the importance of their rights makes it obvious that morality is based on something larger than personal opinions. The first idea of this “something larger” that may come to mind is society. For we typically learn about our rights, and their lasting importance, by studying the founding documents of our society.

In America, documents like The Declaration of Independence and The Constitution of the United States tell us, in almost sacred language, what our rights are. Other countries have similar documents, which are equally revered by their citizens. These documents may acknowledge more or fewer rights than are acknowledged in our country; they sometimes even describe quite different forms of government. Yet citizens of those countries seem to be just as proud of their societies and cultural achievements as we are of ours.

In general, we believe in America; just as Canadians believe in Canada, and just as Mexicans believe in México. There is something to be said for the idea that what makes a society great is those who believe in it. And it is not too much of a leap from there to say that what makes a society’s moral principles correct is those who believe in them. This is an idea widely known as cultural relativism.

The moral theory of cultural relativism is suggested by the following statement from the American Anthropological Association, from the mid-20th century:

Ideas of right and wrong, good and evil, are found in all societies, though they differ in their expression among different peoples. What is held to be a human right in one society may be regarded as anti-social by another people, or by the same people in a different period of their history.... Even the nature of the physical world, the colors we see, the sounds we hear, are conditioned by the language we speak, which is part of the culture into which we are born. (542)

We recognize immediately that we have entered another culture by the difference in the spoken language. The language of a culture provides rules for speaking, and for making oneself understood in interactions with others in the culture. Language and meaning are possible only for a group of individuals accepting common principles of grammar. Similarly, the morality of a culture may be possible only because of the common acceptance of its principles. In many Eastern cultures, for example, parents have long accepted the responsibility of arranging their children’s marriages. But this is not accepted in the West. Polygamy is practiced
in some cultures of the world, but forbidden in most others.

**Relativism and Absolutism**

*Relativism* in ethics is the belief that the correctness of moral principles can vary, depending on peoples’ attitudes or circumstances. In other words, it is the belief that morality is *relative.*

As relativists see it, for example, the principle that “Polygamy is not wrong” is correct relative to cultures that accept it; and it is incorrect relative to those that do not accept it. In agreement with relativism also is the idea that the correctness of moral principles can vary for the same culture at different times. Many nations that now reject slavery had earlier accepted and practiced it, in good conscience. So according to relativists, though it may be wrong for them now, because of their current disapproval, it was not wrong for them earlier, when it met their approval.

*Absolutism* is the opposite of relativism. An absolutist thinks that the correctness of moral principles does not vary from person to person, from culture to culture, or from time to time. An absolutist thinks, in other words, that moral principles are universal, and permanent.

Everyone, relativists and absolutists alike, recognizes that different cultures accept different principles, or that moral beliefs vary from place to place, and from time to time. But absolutists do not believe that the correctness of moral principles depends on their being accepted or believed by anyone. So an absolutist may think that slavery is wrong everywhere and always, and that therefore any society is wrong to accept it and practice it. Absolutists need not be rigid in holding their moral opinions. They can think that some of their moral beliefs might be incorrect; and they can even be uncertain what to believe. What makes them absolutists is only their assumption that relativism is false: their assumption, in other words, that correct moral principles, whatever they happen to be, are correct for everyone, everywhere, all the time.

**The Theory of Cultural Relativism**

Having explained the concept of “relativism,” we should pause now to introduce the theory of *cultural* relativism. Like any moral theory, cultural relativism can be expected to explain what the correct moral principles are, and provide reasons for thinking they are correct. The theory can be stated as follows:

**Statement of Cultural Relativism:**

*The correct moral principles are the ones that are accepted by a culture; and the culture’s accepting them is what makes them correct. Since different cultures can accept different moral principles, different principles can be correct for different cultures.*

**What is a Culture?**

Unfortunately, it is not easy to give an exact and informative definition of “culture.” This makes it somewhat difficult to explain cultural relativism.

It is easier to define the idea of a “nation,” since nations have geographical borders, unified legal and political systems, and official languages. But nations seem capable of including multiple cultures within their borders; and cultures can be shared by people living in different nations. Cultures can also include “sub-cultures,” and sometimes “counter-cultures.” These are smaller groups that may speak the language of the broader culture to which they belong, but they may use unique slang terms, and their
members may dress and behave unconventionally.

The difficulty of defining a culture makes it difficult to identify correct moral principles as they are defined by cultural relativism.

For example, in The United States before the 1960s, the moral principle that it is wrong for opposite-sex couples to live together without being married was generally accepted. But a counter-culture of younger people, referred to as “hippies,” began openly violating this rule. They accepted different living arrangements, and accepted the moral principle that it is not wrong for unmarried couples to have children and raise families. They therefore belonged to a culture that accepted one moral principle about opposite-sex behavior, at the same time they belonged to a (sub)culture that accepted an opposite principle. For the theory of cultural relativism, this makes it hard to say whether the new living arrangements were right or wrong.

A cultural relativist might respond to this example by saying that it merely shows us how vague and variable some rules of morality can be. She might say that even though it is impossible to define “culture” precisely, there are still many obvious examples of different peoples’ or nations’ accepting quite different principles. Cultural views on polygamy, and on homosexuality, are two good examples.

Another good example is the different roles that women are allowed to play in society. In some countries women are not allowed to vote, much less to run for office. They may not even be allowed to own property. People in these cultures, on the whole, believe that this is the way it should be. There are also different views around the world on the morality of capital punishment. Some nations that have outlawed it even refuse to extradite criminals to countries that practice it. Examples like these, as many people see it, make a strong case for cultural relativism.

An Argument for Cultural Relativism

A line of reasoning that has made cultural relativism attractive, especially to people who have broad experience of different cultures, is known as “The Argument from Cultural Differences.”

This simple argument begins with an established fact, which no one doubts, and moves directly to a conclusion.

Argument from Cultural Differences

(1) Different cultures around the world accept different moral principles.
(2) Therefore, morality is different for different cultures; what is right in one culture can be wrong in another.

The conclusion here is roughly the same idea as cultural relativism. So the factual premise that precedes it seems to provide very firm support for accepting that theory. Not everyone thinks so, however.

Logic is the study of argument and reasoning, without regard to whether it is moral reasoning, or scientific reasoning. Logicians consider an argument to be good when, upon recognizing its premises as true, we should be convinced that its conclusion is true.

The argument from cultural relativism is what logicians call invalid, and it is important to see why. We can believe that different cultures accept different moral principles, as indicated in statement (1), but still doubt whether morality is different for different cultures, as is claimed in statement (2). A few examples can help clarify this.

But first, just in case some readers might be unfamiliar with logic, it will be a good idea to provide an example of an argument that is good, or logically valid. In a valid argument, believing the premise while doubt-
ing the statement in the conclusion will be impossible. Take this simple example:

(1) Yaltzóon is a part of Norupía;
(2) Therefore, Norupía is larger than Yaltzóon.

Never mind if you know nothing about Norupía. If you were to believe that statement (1) is true, then you should be convinced of the conclusion in statement (2). You should not be able to doubt that it is true, while believing statement (1). That is what makes this an example of a logically valid argument.

Now, back to the argument from cultural differences. The premise of that argument is undeniable, since different cultures do accept different moral principles. Yet it is still reasonable to doubt the conclusion of the argument. We can agree that people in different cultures believe in different moral principles. But we can still doubt that their different beliefs are correct, which is what cultural relativism says.

Compare this example: if two astronomers have different beliefs about the size of a distant star, that does not make them both correct. Nor would this be true if two historians each believe that a different man acted as the lone assassin of a prime minister. It would not make any difference if these examples were about astronomers or historians belonging to different cultures. It doesn’t matter also if everyone in those different cultures held those different beliefs. If all of the people in some culture accepted some principle of astronomy, or if they all accepted a particular historical explanation, then this, by itself, would not make that culture’s astronomy or history correct.

The same seems true for moral principles. Even if we believe that different cultures have different moral beliefs, we are not forced to say that morality is different for different cultures. For it could be that a culture is mistaken in the moral principles it accepts. That is what we would say about the two disagreeing astronomers, or the two disagreeing historians: one of the two, or perhaps both, are mistaken in their beliefs.

Someone might now object to the last point along these lines. “You’re treating morality like science or history; but these are quite different. The facts of science and history can be proven to be the same for all cultures. But morality is not like that. Its principles are different for different cultures.”

Someone might object that way, but such an objection will be ineffective. Recall the opening example at the beginning of this book: the example about Professor Amy Bishop. Her action was wrong, and it is hard to believe that its wrongness depends on the fact that people in our culture believe it is wrong, or that they happen disapprove of it. It is hard to imagine that the fact that her action was wrong is any different from facts about a distant star, in astronomy, or facts about some event in history.

**Cultural Relativism and Social Sciences**

In fields like anthropology, sociology and social psychology, students are often taught that moral beliefs and practices vary from culture to culture. In history, also, it is taught that the cultural beliefs and practices of the same culture or society can vary over time. These teachings are correct, and important. But we must be careful to distinguish between the beliefs and practices that cultures do accept, and the beliefs and practices they should accept.

Just because a culture or society does accept some belief or practice does not mean that it should. In the field of ethics, we can ask whether cultures should accept the beliefs and practices they accept. But social scientists do not usually seek to understand cultural beliefs and practices in the way that
ethics does. They do not generally attempt to explain why the beliefs and practices of particular cultures are ones they should or should not accept.

Still, cultural relativism can be wisely adopted as a method for cultural studies in the social sciences and history. An anthropologist studying the moral beliefs and practices of another culture will not succeed in understanding them so long as she is unwilling to see them through the eyes of a person belonging to that culture. Those belonging to a culture being studied will be very likely to believe the moral principles accepted by the culture to be correct. Likewise, therefore, a scientist who wishes to understand the culture should see them in the same way—at least while conducting her work. For this reason it is appropriate for social scientists to operate under the assumption of cultural relativism: the assumption that the moral principles accepted by a culture are correct for that culture, on account of their being accepted.

Cultural relativism can be an appropriate method for social science, even if, for ethics, it may be among the least attractive explanations of the correctness of moral principles.

The example just below should help to explain why we should say there is more to right and wrong, and morality in general, than the principles and practices that are accepted by the people of different cultures.

An International Custody Dispute

Sean Goldman was born in Red Bank, N.J. in May 2000. His father, David Goldman is American; his mother, Bruna Bianchi Carneiro Ribeiro, was from Brazil. In 2004 David’s mother took him on a two-week vacation to visit her family in Brazil. But once there, she was unwilling to return to The United States. She subsequently obtained a divorce from Sean’s father, and later married a Brazilian man. But in 2008 she died, while giving birth to another child, by her new husband.

In America, when a parent dies the children are generally expected to remain in the custody of the surviving parent. It makes little difference to Americans whether the surviving parent is the mother or the father. But in Brazil, when a mother dies, her surviving children are expected to be raised not by their father, but by their grandmother, if she is willing and able to do so. At least this is how Sean’s Brazilian grandmother described the accepted practice of her culture:

Our moral foundation values the mother’s role. In the absence of the mother, the raising should be done by the grandmother. That’s how it’s done in Brazil, from north to south, regardless of race, religion or social class. It’s natural that foreigners, with a different foundation, would not understand these authentically Brazilian feelings.

Sean’s American father believed, as Americans typically do, that he should be raised by his surviving parent. But his Brazilian grandmother believed, as Brazilians typically do, that she should raise him. So a complicated custody battle ensued in the Brazilian courts, as Sean’s father tried to have his son returned to live with him in The United States.

When we think of cultures in isolation, as populations who largely agree on their basic beliefs and practices, cultural relativism can seem to offer a simple and attractive explanation of the correctness of moral principles. But when we consider that members of different cultures can interact, cultural relativism’s explanation seems inadequate; because interaction by people from different cultures can give rise to difficult dilemmas. Under cultural relativism, Sean Goldman’s American father and Brazilian grandmother are each correct in their different judgments about what is right
for him. Yet both judgments cannot be correct for this case.

The Goldman custody dispute was finally resolved when the Supreme Court of Brazil ruled that Sean must be returned to The United States. Because of the circumstances of his arrival in Brazil five years earlier, he was considered to have been abducted by his mother. This legal judgment invoked a convention determining which country’s court system is responsible for deciding his case. The U.S. and Brazil, like most countries in the world, are parties to an international treaty called “The Hague Abduction Convention.” Each nation recognizes that its laws or principles related to child custody within its own borders may not always lead to correct outcomes in international disputes.

What the Goldman case illustrates, therefore, is the need for correct moral principles that are “higher” than principles accepted by different cultures. It illustrates the limitations of the theory of cultural relativism when it comes to judging the rightness or wrongness of inter-cultural actions and practices.

More Problems for Cultural Relativism

Just above it was seen why a common line of reasoning that has led people to believe in cultural relativism, the argument from cultural differences, is not a very good argument. It was then shown how cases like the Sean Goldman custody dispute pose a problem for the theory of cultural relativism, and provide a reason for not accepting it.

Other problems that arise for the theory should be pointed out also. Two more will follow here. Together they build a strong case for thinking that it is unwise to base the correctness of moral principles on the beliefs of the people of a culture or society, so that different moral principles can be correct for different cultures or societies.

1. Intra-Cultural Disagreement

Just as people from different cultures can accept different moral principles, so, it seems, can people belonging to the same culture. And when they do, the theory of cultural relativism unfortunately provides no guidance for understanding the correctness of those principles.

The morality of abortion is a suitable issue for illustrating this problem. What does cultural relativism tell us about the correctness of a moral principle saying that abortion is wrong, when the population of a society or culture is divided over the issue? In most modern societies, neither the principle that abortion is wrong, nor the principle that it is not wrong, is accepted by the entire population. It would obviously be implausible to say that, therefore, abortion is neither right nor wrong in those societies. But that is what cultural relativism must say—unless it can offer a way to determine when a principle that is not accepted by all of the people belonging to a culture or society is correct.

Cultural relativists can say that acceptance of a moral principle by a majority of the population is what makes it correct. But that still leaves the problem of determining the morality of abortion when a population’s sentiments are evenly divided. And even when there may be a clear majority favoring a moral principle, cultural relativism seems to offer an unsuitable response to a minority favoring its opposite.

Suppose the majority believes that abortion is wrong; and suppose that someone in the minority says, “Contrary to the majority’s belief that abortion is wrong, I believe it is not wrong.” That seems like an at least sensible thing for someone to say.
But to a cultural relativist, that is like saying, “Contrary to abortion’s being wrong, I believe it is not wrong,” which is nonsense.

The problem of intra-cultural moral disagreement, for cultural relativism, is that when people within the same culture accept opposite moral principles for some way of acting, the morality of that action cannot be determined. In some cases it cannot even be intelligibly expressed.

2. Evaluating One’s Own Culture

According to the theory of cultural relativism, the moral principles accepted in a culture or society are correct. So it would be a mistake to attempt to criticize a culture based on the principles it accepts, or based on the principles that it does not accept. It is of course a mistake to criticize something correct! Thus, when the leaders of Western democracies like The United States criticize Middle-Eastern and Asian governments for not respecting human rights, these are not valid criticisms, according to cultural relativism. For according to that theory, whatever these countries believe about human rights—including even that they don’t exist—is correct, and so uncriticizable.

But the same must also apply for anyone who is critical of the moral practices of his own society. For as cultural relativists see it, even criticizing one’s own country for the principles it accepts, or does not accept, is misguided. A citizen can have no basis for judging that her country is good, or bad, on account of the moral principles accepted by its population. Those principles will always be correct, according to cultural relativism. Hence, it makes no sense for a citizen to imagine that her country could accept any better principles.

The senselessness of evaluating one’s own country or society in cultural relativism raises additional problems. One is related to moral reform. The way most people see things, it can be sensible to criticize some widely accepted attitudes of one’s own society, and by doing so, bring about a positive change. The social criticisms and non-violent actions of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. are a good example. The “negro race,” as Dr. King often referred to them, had been treated like second-class citizens in America, well into the 20th century—to say nothing of the way they were treated before the Civil War. Yet the principles upon which this treatment was based had been accepted by the majority of the society. So that should mean, according to cultural relativism, that treating negroes as second-class citizens was right; because that was the practice most widely accepted. It should also mean that in trying to introduce new attitudes and practices, Dr. King was doing something wrong. He was encouraging people in his society to act in ways that were contrary to its accepted moral principles. So he was wrong to do that, according to cultural relativism.

Today Dr. King is widely admired for having had the courage to speak out and attempt to improve his society’s accepted principles. But according to cultural relativism, the very idea of “improving” the principles accepted by a society makes no sense.

Cultural relativism denies that any moral principles are valid for a culture or society, apart from the ones it accepts. It follows, then, that in no period of its history can a society accept better or worse principles than in any other period. Americans today more widely accept a principle of equal treatment of all citizens. There have been great gains in what are called “civil rights.” But cultural relativists cannot say that these have been changes for the better, or even for the worse. One set of principles for the treatment of racial minorities has been replaced by another. Nothing is better or
worse, as far as cultural relativism is concerned. Things are only different now.

In the previous chapter, on individual subjectivism, it was seen how that theory appears incompatible with psychological facts about self-esteem. The problem was that it is not possible to take pride in being a good person if personal goodness is whatever you believe it is. A person’s self-esteem depends on recognizing some objective standard of personal goodness. And something similar is true for feelings of pride in one’s country.

It is not possible to feel genuinely proud of your country unless you think of it as meeting correct standards for what countries should be—standards not established merely by what most people in your country happen to believe. Consequently, the theory of cultural relativism has a problem related to national pride.

In order to be genuinely proud of your country you must think of some moral principles as correct, apart from your country’s accepting them—so that, if your country did not accept them, it would be worse. The same is true, on the negative side, for being ashamed of your country. In order to be ashamed of your country, as people sometimes are, it is necessary to think that there are correct principles that your country or society does not accept, but should accept, and follow. Cultural relativism denies that there could be any principles like this. So that seems to be a problem if people are expected to be proud of their countries or societies.

Chapter Summary

The theory of cultural relativism is an explanation of what makes moral principles correct. It says that the correct moral principles are the ones that are accepted by a culture, and the culture’s accepting them is what makes them correct. Different moral principles can therefore be correct for different societies, according to cultural relativism. This theory is widely accepted in social sciences like sociology and anthropology. But the methods of the social sciences differ from the method of ethics.

A line of reasoning leading people to apply the theory of cultural relativism in ethics is the argument from cultural differences. But when the reasoning in that argument is analyzed, it can be shown to be faulty. Regarding cultural differences, just because there are different moral beliefs and practices in different societies, it does not follow that morality is different for different societies.

Some noteworthy problems arise if we accept the theory of cultural relativism:

1. The problem of intra-cultural disagreement: when people within the same culture accept opposite moral principles for some action, the morality of that way of acting cannot be determined.

2. The problem of evaluating one’s own culture: concepts like moral reform, and progress in a society’s accepted moral principles, are not meaningful; and genuine feelings of national pride in the goodness of one’s country are not possible.

Where We Go from Here

This chapter has focused on the widely-held belief that morality is different in different places, because different cultures or societies accept different moral principles. It has been shown why some popular arguments for this belief are not very good, and that a set of problems emerge once we adopt it as the explanation of the correctness of moral principles.

In this chapter’s discussion of a culture’s accepted principles and practices, care has been taken not to identify them as religious-
ly based, even though many are. The reason religion has been excluded in this way is that the aim of the next chapter is to explore the relationship between morality and religion. There we shall mainly consider whether it makes sense to assume that God, or religion, provide a suitable basis for correct moral principles. Many people are strongly convinced that they do.

Works Cited


Terms Introduced

Relativism: in ethics, the assumption that the correctness of moral principles can vary, depending on their acceptance. In cultural relativism, the correctness of moral principles depends upon their being accepted by cultures or societies, which can vary in the principles they accept.

Absolutism: the opposite of relativism; the assumption that the correctness of moral principles is independent of individual or cultural belief, so that the same moral principles are correct for everyone. Absolutists in ethics think that moral principles are as universal as scientific laws, or principles of mathematics.

Culture: in cultural relativism, a culture is a social group with shared beliefs about correct moral principles; people in the same culture usually also speak the same language, and so share beliefs about correct principles of grammar. “Society” is commonly used as a synonym for culture, although the two terms can have different meanings.

Valid: in logic, a term for a good or logical argument. An argument is valid when, upon believing its premises, one should also be convinced of its conclusion.

Moral Improvement, Reform: improvement is a change in moral principles accepted by a society, replacing incorrect principles with correct principles; for example, a change from accepting the principle that “Slavery is not wrong,” to accepting that “Slavery is wrong.” Moral reform is a society’s making moral improvement, or efforts to bring this about. In cultural relativism, moral improvement and reform seem impossible, because a society’s accepted moral principles are always correct for that society, however they may change over time.