

Moral Relativism

Bernard Williams: 'Interlude: Relativism' in *Morality*

Bernard Williams: 'The truth in relativism' in *Moral Luck* ch.11 (reprinted from *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (PAS) 75 1974-5)

B. Williams: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* ch 9

J. Meiland: 'Bernard Williams' Relativism' in *Mind* 1979

Gilbert Harman: 'Moral Relativism', Part I in Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (1996)

Gilbert Harman: *Explaining Value* (2000), Part I. Moral Relativism. [This includes reprints of various papers, including 'Moral Relativism Defended' originally from *Philosophical Review* 1975, but also reprinted in Meiland and Krausz (eds.) *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*; and 'Is there a single true morality?' from D. Copp and D. Zimmerman eds., *Morality, Reason and Truth* (1985), also reprinted in M. Krausz (ed.) *Relativism: interpretation and confrontation*.]

G. Harman: *The Nature of Morality* ch.8 (1977)

P. Foot: 'Moral Relativism' in Meiland & Krausz (eds.) *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*

Tim Scanlon: 'Fear of Relativism' ch.9 in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence and Warren Quinn eds., *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory* (1995)

R. Norman: *Reasons for Action* ch.5 'Varieties of ethical relativism'

D. Z. Phillips & H. O. Mounce: *Moral Practices* ch.7

D. Cooper: 'Moral Relativism' in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* III

Robert Arrington: 'Relativism', ch.5 in *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism* (1989)

James Rachels: *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* ch.2 (1986)

Essay questions to choose from:

1. Is it wrong for people in one society to condemn the values of another society?
2. 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.' Could this be coherently adopted by someone as an ethical principle?
3. Is morality a matter of social convention?
4. Can relativism be defended against the charge that it is 'possibly the most absurd view to have been advanced even in moral philosophy' (Williams)?
5. To what problem is cultural relativism supposed to be a solution? Is it a solution?

M.F.

Moral Relativism

General formulation of cultural relativism: the view that the standards governing moral judgement are *relative* to the culture in which the judgements arise, i.e. there are no trans-cultural standards of moral judgement.

A 'vulgar' form of relativism (cf. Williams' *Morality* for different, and fuller formulation):

Standards of morality are all culturally relative...

therefore it is **wrong** to pass moral judgement upon the practices of other cultures.

This style of relativism is obviously self-refuting, since its very formulation involves a *non-relative* use of 'wrong' (or whatever equivalent) in order to rule out non-relative moral judgements. Judgements like 'It is wrong to pass moral judgement upon the practices of other cultures' or 'It's wrong to criticize other cultures' are themselves (at least on the face of it) trans-cultural or non-relative moral judgements.

Perhaps this suggests that the only coherent forms of relativism will be based not on any non-relative

ethical thesis, but on a conception of the *relation* between the two or more moral cultures in question (e.g. a relation of great social/historical distance) being such that the **preconditions** of making ethical judgements across them are not met.

1) Gilbert Harman's relativism of 'inner judgements'

'Inner judgements' are judgements which use the 'ought' of morality (as opposed to the 'ought' of expectation, of rationality, or of a weaker normativity than morality proper). Inner judgements are made specifically of individual agents (rather than, say, of actions or states of affairs).

Judgements of this sort presuppose (have as a precondition) that the object and the subject of the judgement (the person being judged and the judge) are in some broad **agreement in 'motivational attitudes'** i.e. motivations for action. Harman claims this as a feature of the **logical form** of inner judgements.

But it is quite easy (too easy?) to think of examples where this precondition is not met, and consequently where, according to Harman, genuinely moral judgements cannot be made. He cites the example of Hitler: 'the agent judged [Hitler] seems beyond the pale - in other words beyond the motivational reach of the relevant moral considerations' (p.193 in original paper).

According to Harman, all we can express in relation to Hitler and his actions involves the 'ought' not of inner judgements but of judgements about states of affairs or situations. We can lament a historical fact of genocide thus: 'the holocaust ought not to have happened'.

(Does this show that Harman's formulation of what it is to be in agreement over motivational attitudes is too strong, i.e. too easily not met? Is it a requirement of any moral theory that it precisely *can* make sense of our making moral judgements about figures such as Hitler?)

2) Bernard Williams' truth in relativism: the 'relativism of distance'

For relativism to be true, there must be at least two systems of moral beliefs, S1 and S2, which are **exclusive** of each other (satisfy 'conditions of exclusivity').

Williams' minimal proposal for satisfying this condition is that S1 and S2 share (some appropriately similar formulation of) a single question, to which they give yes/no answers respectively.

On Williams' view, it is a precondition of making ethical judgements that the moral system in S2 be a **real option** for the judge from S1; i.e. s/he could **convert** to S2 without (i) losing a 'grip on reality' or going 'insane', and (ii) retrospectively understand the decision to convert in the light of rational comparisons between the new system and the old. (So, we might say, a psychological and a rational

requirement.)

Williams uses this to introduce the distinction between `real' and merely `notional confrontation':

`There is a real confrontation between S1 and S2 at a given time if there is a group at that time for whom each of S1 and S2 is a real option' (p.138).

So, his relativism carves out the possibility that there are certain degrees of social/historical/psychological distance across which moral judgements cannot reach. Ethical judgements have *real confrontation* as a precondition; where there is only notional confrontation, the precondition for making such judgements is not met. (Compare Harman's view: there the (much stronger) precondition is that there be `shared motivational attitudes' between judge and judged.)

Motivations for relativism

(I) Anti-`imperialism' in practice: we shouldn't impose our moral ideas on other cultures about, and vice-versa.

(II) Explaining cultural diversity in morals: relativism provides an answer to the apparent fact of moral diversity. If there are no trans-cultural norms for moral judgement, then diversity is not surprising, and it need not be the case that moral diversity implies error.

(III) Responding to the idea that ethical value (and thus the capacity for any given consideration to weigh with an agent as an ethical *reason* for or against doing something) is dependent upon the agent's participation in a shared way of life (see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, ch.15 - the concept of an ethical `tradition').

Possible lines of objection

1 - **Conservatism vis-à-vis other cultures:** Surely the proper anti-imperialist commitment doesn't lead to relativism (according to which we are not entitled even to make moral *judgements* about other cultures' practices)? Rather it encourages the adoption of an independent political principle of practical *toleration* and non-intervention in the practices of other cultures. Note, however, that even this non-interventionism surely has limits: in cases where another culture seems to endorse (more likely: some indigenous powerful group endorses) practices of, say, severe oppression of women or particular racial groups, is it not precisely immoral simply to stand by without taking any action?

2 - **Conservatism within a culture:** Does relativism have the consequence that moral agents are conceived as unreflectively, unthinkingly, obedient to their own cultural moral customs? What does the relativist make of dissent and debate within a culture? (See Harman on moral `bargaining'.)

3 - **`Culture'?:** doesn't relativism rely on an excessively monolithic conception of moral culture? Most

cultures are fractured in some way. In such a culture, to whose values is a given moral question supposed to be relative?

(e.g. Afghanistan: the Taliban, or dissidents?).

4 - **Inconsistency**: does relativism have the consequence that there are, or could be, moral judgements which are both true and false? e.g. in S1 it is true that for women not to cover their faces in public is immoral; and in S2 the same moral proposition is false.

Possible reply: relativism need not have this consequence, since the relativist can say that (in as far as moral statements are truth-apt at all) moral truth is relativized to culture. So one can only say 'such-and-such moral proposition is true-in-S1' and 'such-and-such moral proposition is true-in-S2'. (See Philippa Foot's paper 'Moral Relativism'.)

5 - **Intrinsically universalist ambitions of ethical thought**: Isn't ethical thought, ethical sensibility, intrinsically universalist in its ambition? Or at least intrinsically much more *generalized* in its remit than cultural relativism allows? We *internalize* certain values through a process of ethical formation that is culturally and historically specific - and yet we do not, cannot (should not?) leave them at passport control when we visit another culture. Thus cultural relativism is at odds with ethical psychology, and perhaps also inadequate as an account of the very structure of ethical thought.

One final reflection: we should distinguish between the modest *historicist* idea that ethical thought can only grow out of a shared way of life (see (III) above) from the idea that there is a single determinate standard for ethical judgement, namely the standard [if any] provided by the culture in question.

The first, historicist, idea is a point about the historical-cultural *preconditions* of any ethical thinking; the second, cultural relativist, and much stronger idea makes a concrete proposal for a positive *standard of moral authority* -

viz. the values of the culture in question. Perhaps one might endorse the first but not the second.

M.F.