

Moral absolutism, moral nihilism, moral relativism

Today we begin our discussion of ethics. Later we will be turning our attention to a few issues in applied ethics -- questions about what it is right or wrong to do in particular cases. But we will be beginning our discussion of ethics by addressing some general questions. And today we begin with the most general question of all: are there facts about what it is right and wrong for us to do and, if so, what are those facts like?

There is an interesting contrast between many peoples' intuitions about ethical claims, and their intuitions about other sorts of claims; this contrast can be brought out by considering some examples. Suppose that you are asked some controversial ethical question, like

Was it morally permissible for Truman to use atomic weapons in World War II?

or

Is it morally wrong for Notre Dame to have Obama as the commencement speaker?

Many people would respond to at least some questions of this sort -- even if not the examples above -- by saying something like:

"It depends on your perspective."

"For me this is wrong, but that does not mean that it is wrong for everyone."

"Well, I think that this is wrong, but that is just my opinion."

It is interesting that we would not respond this way to questions about, for example, what is being served in North Dining Hall. In response to an important dining hall question like

Do they have beef stroganoff in North Dining Hall tonight?

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It is interesting that we would not respond this way to questions about, for example, what is being served in North Dining Hall. In response to an important dining hall question like

Do they have beef stroganoff in North Dining Hall tonight?

no one would respond by saying

“It depends on your perspective.”

“For me it is true that they are serving the stroganoff, but that does not mean that it is true for everyone.”

“Well, I think that they are serving stroganoff, but that is just my opinion.”

or, if we would, they would mean quite different things than when used in answer to the ethical question.

The fact that we would not give answers of this sort indicates that we all endorse a thesis that might be called **dining hall absolutism**: we think that there are genuine facts about what food is being served in the dining hall, and that these facts do not depend on the perspective, opinion, or anything about the person who happens to be discussing these facts.

Just so, the fact that people would respond to at least some ethical questions by saying things like

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“For me this is wrong, but that does not mean that it is wrong for everyone.”

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indicates that these people are, in at least some moods, tempted to deny the following thesis:

Moral absolutism: there are facts about which actions are right and wrong, and these facts do not depend on the perspective, opinion, or anything about the person who happens to be describing those facts.

There are, broadly speaking, two ways of denying moral absolutism. One might say that there are no facts about what is right and wrong; or one might say that there are facts about what is right and wrong, but that these facts are relative to a person or group of persons.

Let's consider the first, more radical view:

Moral nihilism: there are no facts about which actions are right and wrong.

This view faces an immediate problem: the problem is to explain what if there are no facts about what is right and wrong, we do when we say things like “Stealing is wrong!”

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The moral nihilist might respond to this challenge by pointing out that we quite often use language to do things other than describe facts. Consider the following examples:

“Get out of my classroom!”

“I declare you husband and wife.”

“Boooo!” (said while at sporting event)

These are both perfectly meaningful uses of language, but neither is an attempt to describe some fact in the world. So perhaps the moral nihilist should say that our uses of ethical language, as in

“Stealing is wrong!”

are like these; perhaps the purpose of this sort of sentence is not to describe a fact, but to do something else.

This raises the question: what are the purposes of our uses of ethical language?

One promising answer to this question is: they are commands, like saying “Get out of my classroom!” Perhaps saying the above sentence about capital punishment is a way of saying something like this:

“Don’t steal!”

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On this view, uses of words like “wrong” and “right” are not meant to describe facts in the world, but rather are used to issue commands, or exhortations.

One apparent strength of this sort of view is that it explains an interesting fact about moral claims: that moral disagreements seem particularly resistant to resolution. Sometimes, of course, moral disagreements can be resolved; but other times, it seems possible for two people to, for example, know all of the relevant facts about abortion, and still disagree about whether it is sometimes morally permissible. By contrast, it does not seem possible for two people to know all of the relevant facts about the dining hall, and yet disagree about whether stroganoff is on offer.

On the present view, this sort of persistent disagreement would be explained by the fact that the two people are really not disagreeing about any facts about the world: they are, instead, simply expressing contrary preferences.

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This raises the question: what are the purposes of our uses of ethical language, if not to state facts?

One promising answer to this question is: they are commands, like saying “Get out of my classroom!” Perhaps saying the above sentence about capital punishment is a way of saying something like this:

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However, even if this view seems plausible for sentences like “Stealing is wrong”, it does not fit other uses of ethical language as well. Consider, for example past tense sentences like

“The Athenians were wrong to put Socrates to death.”

could this really mean:

“Athenians, don’t put Socrates to death!”

or

“Don’t support the Athenians’ decision to put Socrates to death!”

This seems absurd.

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Other problems arise with uses of ethical language in more complex sentences. For example, the following sentence seems to make sense:

If stealing is wrong, then Bob would never steal.

But consider how the sort of nihilist we are considering might analyze this sentence:

If don't steal!, then Bob would never steal.

This doesn't just seem like the wrong analysis; it is not even grammatical. The problem seems to be that we cannot grammatically use imperatives in the “if” part of an “if-then” sentence, even though we can use ethical sentences in that way. It seems to follow that ethical sentences can't just be disguised imperatives.

So this way of making sense of ethical language does not make moral nihilism seem very appealing. One other option for the moral nihilist is worth considering. Consider what my two year old daughter is doing when she says:

“Santa Claus will bring me an Elmo doll this year.”

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“Santa Claus will bring me an Elmo doll this year.”

It seems clear that she is trying to describe the world: she is saying something about how she takes the world to be. It’s just that what she is saying is false, since there is no Santa Claus.

The moral nihilist might say the same thing about “Stealing is wrong”: he might say that it is an attempt to describe the world, but one which is always false, since there are no such things as right and wrong actions.

This strikes many people as an extreme view. So let’s move to consideration of our second source of opposition to moral absolutism: the view that there are facts about which actions are right and wrong, but that these facts are, in some way or another, relative to a person or group of people.

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This strikes many people as an extreme view. So let's move to consideration of our second source of opposition to moral absolutism: the view that there are facts about which actions are right and wrong, but that these facts are, in some way or another, relative to a person or group of people.

A first question is about what a view like this could mean. In fact, there are many things that it could mean, but one thing it could mean is this:

Moral relativism: actions are not right or wrong "in themselves", but only relative to a person or group. An action is right relative to a person or group if and only if the action is right according to the standards adopted by that person or group.

A natural next question is: how do we tell what the relevant person or group is? Are my actions to be judged by the standards of Americans, residents of Indiana, members of Notre Dame's faculty, or what?

One reply is just to say that we can ask about the morality of my actions relative to any of these sets of standards, depending on what we're interested in. The key claim is that there is no sense in which an action is right or wrong, independently of the standards of some person or society.

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How might one argue for moral relativism?

One clear line of thought is that moral relativism is true because it is just an instance of a more general claim: **global relativism**. Global relativism is the claim that **all** claims -- not just claims about right and wrong -- are only true or false relative to the standards of a person or group.

Unfortunately for this argument, global relativism is a very unattractive position, as has been known since around 360 BC, when Plato wrote the *Theatetus*.

Plato, in effect, suggested that we think about the following statement of the global relativist thesis:

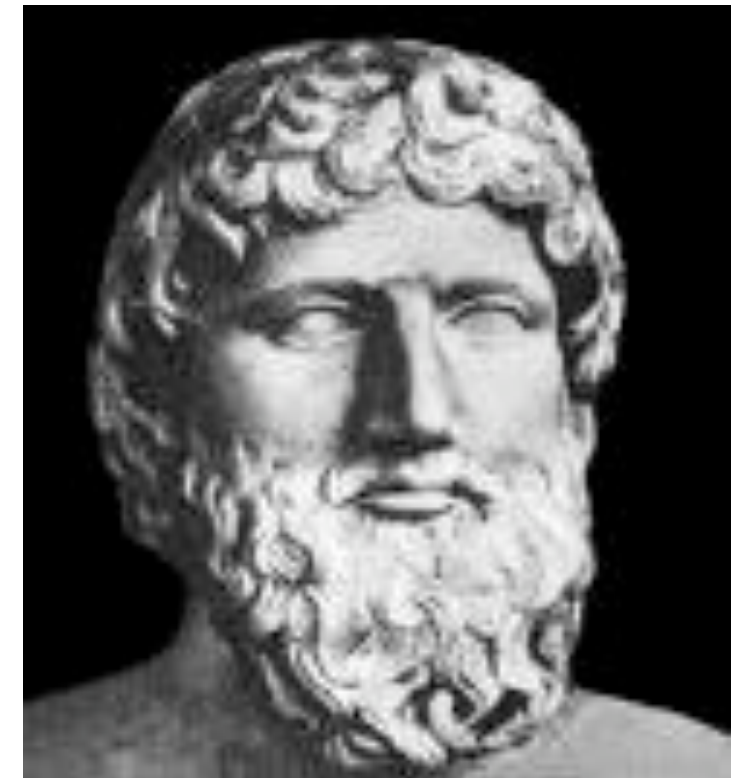
(GR) Every truth is only true relative to the standards of some person or group.

He then posed the following dilemma: either (1) (GR) is true absolutely, or (2) it is true only relative to the framework of global relativism.

If (1), then (GR) is false, since it is a counterexample to itself.

If (2), then no defense of (GR) will give someone who is not a global relativist a reason to believe it, since such a defense would only show that (GR) is true relative to some framework other than his own.

So the moral relativist would do better not to rest his position on global relativism.



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How might one argue for moral relativism?

One important line of argument is the same as the argument considered above for moral nihilism: the persistence of moral disagreement. Moral relativists often focus, in particular, on the wide disparities between the moral views of different cultures. This is just what moral relativism should lead us to expect, since according to the moral relativist, what is right in one culture is typically different than what is right in another.

But this disparity in moral views can look puzzling from the point of view of the moral absolutist. If what is right is right independent of one's social group, how can different cultures come to such different views about what is right and wrong?

There are a few responses to this argument from the point of view of moral absolutism.

One is to say that the level of moral disagreement between cultures has been systematically exaggerated, and that the level of moral agreement between them has been systematically underestimated.

A second (perhaps complementary strategy) is to say that the moral relativist's explanation of the disagreement we do find is, in the end, undercut by closer attention to the nature of that disagreement.

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A second (perhaps complementary strategy) is to say that the moral relativist’s explanation of the disagreement we do find is, in the end, undercut by closer attention to the nature of that disagreement.

This is the strategy pursued by Alasdair MacIntyre in the reading for today.

When we look at the moral views of various cultures, MacIntyre says, one thing we do not find is the view that these views are only binding on members of the relevant culture. Rather, the moral views of cultures are typically views about how it is best for human beings in general to live, and not just members of that culture. This, MacIntyre, says,

... reveals the incompatibility of any coherent relativism with the beliefs and practices of all the major moral cultures and in so doing it suggests that relativism, although it does not entail moral scepticism, does entail a rejection of the standpoints of all those cultures. For the only judgment taken by moral relativism to be unqualifiedly true is the judgment that no judgment advanced from the standpoints of those cultures is unqualifiedly true.



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There is thus a sense in which, if relativism is true, almost everyone throughout history has had a mistaken view of the status of their own moral beliefs.



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But relativism, MacIntyre thinks, has another cost. It makes impossible the sort of constructive engagement between rival moral traditions which should be our goal.

In this sense, MacIntyre compares relativism to a stance which simply dismisses all alien cultures as inferior:

What this type of stance precludes is the possibility of learning anything of substance from rival and incompatible moral cultures. But so equally does another at first sight very different stance, that of a certain kind of relativism. This kind of relativist begins by noting correctly that all the attempts of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers to identify a universal and neutral standard, one compelling to all rational agents whatever their culture, by appeal to which the competing claims of rival standpoints could be rationally adjudicated, have failed. The relativist then further notes that each particular moral standpoint has its own standards of justification and its own modes of justification internal to it. From these two starting-points the relativist concludes that from the standpoint of each particular moral culture its adherents have good reason to believe that they are in the right in their disputes with the adherents of other rival moral cultures and that there is no external rationally justifiable standard by appeal to which they could be shown to be mistaken. But it follows, just as it did for those who dismissed others as barbarians or savages, that one moral culture cannot learn from another. Should we accept this disquieting conclusion?



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Why is it hard for the relativist to accommodate learning from other cultures? How should the relativist think of the claim that the moral views of one's own society are radically mistaken?

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MacIntyre's view is that the falsity of relativism is a kind of presupposition of constructive engagement with others who have radically different moral views.

This is, in a way, the reverse of a very commonly held view.



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This is the view that links moral absolutism with **intolerance** for the views of others, and relativism with tolerance.

This view is confused for other reasons as well. For one thing, if what we want is a view which makes sense of the fact that tolerance for diverse views is a universal good, then we should clearly go for moral absolutism, **not** moral relativism -- after all, moral relativism denies that there are any such things as universal goods.

The other side of the same coin is that moral relativism seems to make some kinds of intolerance immune from criticism -- how is the relativist to explain why intolerance in a culture which promotes it is wrong, not only for us, but also for members of that culture?

This is related to a general worry about moral relativism. Quite often, we want to make claims to the effect that certain actions were wrong, even though the actions were not wrong from the point of view of the society of the people performing the actions. Consider, for example:

It was wrong for property owners in the antebellum South to own slaves.

The relativist might explain the fact that sentences like this seem true to **us** by saying that, when we make claims like this, we are really saying that this was wrong, according to **our** moral code.

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But in a way, this only postpones the problem. We also want to say that our moral code is **superior**, in this respect, to that operative among property owners in the antebellum South. And we do not mean just to be making the trivially true claim that our moral code is superior to theirs **by the standards of our moral code**. But, if moral relativism is true, there does not seem to be any other true claim that we could be making.

This raises the question: if moral relativism is false, what does it mean to say that, for example, capital punishment is wrong *for me*?

Aside from the claim that it is wrong for me to engage in capital punishment -- which is not what is meant -- it is hard to see what this sort of claim could mean -- other than the claim that capital punishment is (absolutely) wrong, or the claim that I (absolutely) believe that it is.