

## Moral Relativism

*Paul Sheehy*

### 1. *Introduction*

It is commonplace to hear the view expressed that something may be right or good *for me* or *for us* while not being so *for you*. Furthermore, this difference is not a problem to be overcome, but rather is an expression of a basic truth about morality. The standards or principles by which one makes moral judgements or evaluations are not absolute or universal or wholly objective, but are relative to the individual or her community. The Greek historian Herodotus reported an experiment conducted by the Persian king Darius (one of the first recorded pieces of anthropological investigation?). Darius enquired of Greeks how much they would need to be paid in order to eat the bodies of their (deceased) fathers. No amount of money could induce them to do such a thing for it was absolutely contrary to the traditional and proper way of treating the dead. Turning to a group from the east of the Persian Empire, Darius asked how much they would need to be paid in order to burn their dead fathers. While burning was acceptable to the Greeks, no amount of money could induce those from the East to do such a thing for it was absolutely contrary to the traditional and proper way of treating the dead. For they could only treat the dead properly and with respect by eating them.

This example of radically conflicting commitments on what counts as the right thing to do has become a staple in discussions of moral diversity, disagreement and relativism. It is immediately apparent to anyone who has not existed in a hermetically sealed cell that there is great diversity in sincerely held judgements concerning value within and between societies. That different systems of values and practices are culturally indexed or relative appears to be a descriptive truth – if a contingent one – about the social world. The culture of pre-Columbian meso-America was one in which there were moral standards and norms which today those living in pluralistic, liberal societies find shocking. It was right to cut the heart out of the still living human sacrificial offering. That practice is wrong to us and would have been considered wrong in medieval Europe or Japan, but not in parts of the ancient world. Today in some communities it is morally right to engage in the practice of clitoridectomy (the surgical removal of the clitoris, which is a feature of some of the so called circumcision practices associated with, for example, certain traditional Sudanese and other East African female rites of passage ceremonies) while in others it is regarded as a morally impermissible assault.

Furthermore, the diversity of moral standards is often accompanied by the prevalence of apparently intractable disputes over judgements and values between and within societies. Disputes such as those concerning the moral permissibility of abortion, hunting and arranged marriages do not on the face of things appear to bear any promise of resolution. Diversity, difference and intractable disagreement over values and judgements appear to be a fixed feature of the social world.

Now, let us recall that we are doing philosophy. That the social domain is characterised by this kind of widespread difference may lead us to think that there is something wrong with the model offered by the full-blown moral realist. This is the

view that when we make moral judgements we are making claims capable of being literally true or false. They are true (or false) by virtue of an independently existing moral reality about which we can and do possess knowledge. The core of the position is that there are moral *facts*. The diversity of moral standards suggests that there is not a single set of moral facts in virtue of which our judgements are true or not. The realist or universalist claims that both sides of a moral dispute cannot both be right, but there is just one true answer. In the face of diversity and disagreement an opposing thesis is that we should regard morality as in some sense *relative*. In this paper I shall examine some ways in which such a claim can be understood, motivated and assessed.

## 2. *Relativism*

What does it mean to say that you are a relativist about something? Or, to hold that some claim is relative? Quite in general if a position is relativist then it holds that one determinate thing is relative in some specifiable way to another. Where there is relativity there is at least a two-term relation (Thomas p.112). Perhaps the most general of relativist claims is a global one concerning the truth of propositions in general:

GR) Truth is relative to the individual

Well, what can this mean? Perhaps it reflects the view of Protagoras: man is the measure of all things. What counts as true is down to the individual or group making the claim. When S claims that p, the truth of that claim is determined (in some way) by S. So when S says that (GR) his interlocutor might ask whether *that* is true. For the truth of a claim is epistemologically an extremely powerful reason why one ought to believe it. Yet, if truth is relative to the speaker, in virtue of what ought the relativist's interlocutor take (GR) as true? This global version of relativism is also a very strong form of scepticism, which has struck many as self-defeating as it undermines itself. The sceptic makes a claim about the impossibility of knowledge, which is surely to cast doubt on the claim itself. In other words we can ask the sceptic if he or she knows nothing. An affirmative answer is just to say that one *does know something* (viz. That they can know nothing/everything can be doubted), and so the devilish idea of global scepticism collapses into contradiction. Or is this too fast? The sceptic may just shrug his shoulders; his purpose is to expose a paradox within the concept of knowledge and to point to the inadequacies of a conception of truth permissive of the generation of sceptical worries. His sceptical arguments aim to show that the idea of knowledge can be used to take us from valid premises to a false or impossible conclusion.

For the moment we shall leave to one side worries about a global version of scepticism. Our present concern is with a local species of relativism; the moral variety.

## 3. *Relativism and morality*

Understood in its most general form moral relativism holds that the following is possible.

- (MR) Two people, S1 and S2, can hold opposite views on a moral issue without either being in any sense mistaken or wrong or otherwise in error.

To appreciate the force of the claim recognise that MR takes S1 and S2 to be fully (as far as that it possible) informed of the relevant facts. Blameless disagreement does not issue from a difference in knowledge. Furthermore, holding opposite views is to hold here contradictory views. Take a moral proposition, *p* - say, burning dogs for fun is wrong. S1 believes that *p* is true and S2 believes that *p* is false. A rational constraint on our beliefs is usually taken to be that of non-contradiction.<sup>1</sup> I cannot both believe that *p* and not-*p*. It might be expected to follow that two persons cannot hold contradictory beliefs without one of them being in error. The relativist must explain why this can indeed be the case.

One (rather quick) answer is available to the subjectivist about morality. Subjectivism denies that our moral language reports truths, and so presents a non-cognitivist understanding of that discourse. Unlike the moral realist the subjectivist denies that moral language expresses knowledge claims. S1 and S2 may just be giving expression to their rather different attitudes towards some action or state of affairs. Whatever judgements we make about the extent to which an individual is warranted, defective or otherwise justified or commendable or not in the attitudes they hold, there is no question of a contradiction arising when different individuals express different attitudes. A similar analysis is available to an error theorist about moral judgements. According to error theory while our judgements are propositional in form, our moral language is systematically misleading or in error as there are no moral facts in virtue of which our moral claims and judgements can be true. On an error theory of moral judgements S1 and S2 turn out (*really*) to each be uttering falsehoods because there are no moral facts in virtue of which their statements could be true. Of course, the price for this quick response is the endorsement of anti-realist theories about the nature of our moral judgements.

For moral realism a problem remains. One might agree that there are cases in which it is possible for agents to hold opposing views while allowing that neither is (i) guilty of error or ignorance about any of the salient non-moral facts; and (ii) bedevilled by any form of irrationality, poor reasoning, bias, lack of attention etc., which could be corrected by further and better reflection. Relativism offers a way of explaining how such a difference in judgement can arise and be justified. If the best account of moral diversity is relativism and moral discourse can and does involve the expression of truths and knowledge (i.e. it is cognitive) then we shall need to justify a form of cognitivist relativism - or show that we can dispense with any commitment to relativism. A cognitivist thesis about relativism appears committed to holding:

- (CR) For a moral proposition *p*, S1 can believe that *p* and S2 can believe that not-*p*, and both claims can be true

That is, both *p* and not-*p* can be true. This looks like a straightforward contradiction. An account is therefore required to either dismiss relativism or to explain the sense in which a genuine deployment of the truth predicate can be maintained while allowing both judgements to be true.

At this point we should note that the discussion has proceeded as one concerned with the truth and meaning of moral statements. The relativist doctrine typically asserts that:

- (i) there is no single moral code or standard or criterion for the assessment of the truth of moral propositions.
- (ii) the truth of moral judgements is indexed or relative to cultural and historical context of the community in which the judgement is made.

This is **meta-ethical relativism**. It is meta-ethical because it is a thesis about the conditions under which judgements are true or justified. Moral truth is relativised to a moral community.

There is also a form of moral relativism which is concerned with practice and policy rather than questions of meaning. This is **normative relativism**. This is a thesis about normative or first order moral judgements - the kind which address directly and substantively questions of what is good, right and virtuous. The normative relativist maintains that:

- (i) one ought not to pass judgement on others who hold (substantially) different values from one's own.
- (ii) one ought not to try to make those others conform to one's values because their values are as valid as one's own.

A question confronting this normative version of relativism is whether it can be coherently stated. Let me explain.

Consider the following line of reasoning.

- P1 Moral standards are relative to a particular culture or community: 'right' means 'right for a given society' (meta-ethical claim).
- P2 The rightness or goodness of an action is determined by its functional role for a given society (sociological or anthropological claim).

Therefore, one should not pass judgement on/one should respect/not intervene in the life or practices of other cultures (normative claim).

This is an instance of the reasoning which Williams in his short book, *Morality* notes leads to relativism in a vulgar and unregenerate form. The conclusion makes a non-relativistic claim. It tells us what it is right to do in our dealings with other societies, and in doing so it employs 'right' in a non-relative fashion not permitted by P1.

The defensibility of normative relativism is also open to question because it appears to entail self-condemnation. Let's say that in our community the normative claim is accepted. What should we do when we see another group, G2, intervene in the practices of some other community, G3? If we criticise G2 then we seem to be breaching our very own principle, and so must condemn ourselves. For we are

attempting impose a value of tolerance and respect on those who do not share it. Yet how can I at once endorse a principle of non-intervention or toleration while allowing to pass unremarked the actions of those who violate it? The difficulty appears that normative relativism requires a sincere commitment to P2 be joined with a kind of quietism with respect to those who do not share that standard. Yet a failure to act in the face of a violation of the principle just casts the sincerity or seriousness with which it is held into doubt. From *my* perspective the normative claim is non-relative in that I hold it to be universally applicable.

Even if one is sceptical about the plausibility of normative relativity, the meta-ethical thesis P1 may nonetheless be a live option. Indeed, that would explain why it is true for me to say that G2 has acted wrongly in intervening and to criticise them for so doing. For in our community it is true that intervention is wrong. Equally, the people in G2 can insist that *for them, by their standard or moral criterion*, it is true that intervention is right. Should we accept meta-ethical relativism?

For a more positive view of normative relativism see Wong - either his chapter in Singer (ed) or entry on moral relativism in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

#### 4. *Meta-ethical relativism*

Let us consider some of the arguments that have been taken to support the meta-ethical thesis.

- **Diversity**

The fact that different cultures and societies acknowledge and are committed to distinct moral standards suggests that morality is relative. Other things being equal we have no reason to doubt the sincerity with which different groups hold their values. Nor, do we need to deny that truth plays a crucial role in moral discourse and judgement **within** a particular moral community. Consider the sort of position suggested by Harman. A statement

S1 'x is wrong'

should always be interpreted as a shorthand form for

S2 'x is wrong in relation to moral framework, M'.

In uttering S1 I do not specify the conditions under which it is true. Rather, it is the sentence and the context in which I state it that determine the conditions under which it is true. The context supplies the moral framework in which the sentence is to be evaluated. So, when I say that 'dog fighting is right', the truth of that claim is determined within the relevant moral framework or context. A moral framework can be thought of as a complex web or network of rules and practices concerning beliefs, attitudes and actions. There is no objectively correct moral framework, but rather there can be multiple frameworks. The constraint on whether a statement is really to be judged true is one of internal consistency within the particular moral framework. Given the complexity of the relations between principles and the situations to which they apply consistency may be an ideal which could only be recognised by a thinker

with perhaps unlimited time and cognitive powers so that reflection can allow their beliefs, attitudes and values come into a stable equilibrium.

- **Disagreement**

Moral disagreement is widespread and intractable. The failure to settle moral disputes supports the view that there is no single moral truth or fact of the matter which could force such a settlement. A community in which one practice is right just cannot agree by its own lights with one in which that very same practice is wrong. We can understand why the dispute is irresolvable by appeal to relativism. The ways in which the relevant facts and states are assessed are just distinct.

- **Functional role of morality**

The function of morality is, *inter alia*, to foster conditions of stability and co-operation and to negotiate conflicts of interest between and within individuals. Those conditions can be realised by the application or adherence of multiple models of morality. Perhaps the most basic function of morality is the regulation and negotiation of conflict. A community committed to, say, Christian values of humility, charity and justice (including a notion of just retribution) has one normative framework in which conflict can be handled. The point is that the very same problem (or set of problems) can be solved in multiple ways.

- **Pessimistic induction from lack of convergence**

We have no reason to impugn people in general with irrationality when it comes to moral matters. Yet, if there were a set of moral truths against which all actions should be evaluated and which are accessible to persons in general, then we should expect some degree of convergence on the moral truths. Convergence will tend to eliminate diversity and we have no grounds for thinking that this has happened. Contrast ethics with natural science. There has been a very high degree of convergence on belief on the fundamental structure of the physical universe. This contrast has been cited by e.g. Mackie as good reason to be sceptical about moral knowledge.

## 5. *Responses*

The grounds for supporting the meta-ethical thesis have elicited a range of response.

It is just too quick to conclude from diversity and variability that there is no single criterion or standard. As Wong notes the argument from diversity does not support relativism in any simple or direct way (see Wong's entry on relativism in Singer (ed)). The fact that different communities affirm as true propositions which are contradictory does not entail that both must be in some way true, and hence support relativism. Diversity is no disproof that there are some beliefs it is better to hold than others. It may be regarded as true in community C1 that we inhabit a planet which revolves around a star. In another community, C2, the people may sincerely believe that we inhabit a disc attached to the back of a giant vole. Furthermore, these beliefs about the nature of our world may be consistent with the other beliefs and attitudes held in their respective communities. The fact of difference may be better explained by the fact that some beliefs are wrong. There is now the burden to discharge of

explaining why certain beliefs are false, but that is just the kind of task characteristic of cases in which there is both diversity and dialogue.

The very same value may be expressed or realised in a different ways. Differences in practices may be superficial differences in the sense that it is the very same fundamental value which finds expression. From Darius' experiment we should not conclude that values are relative, but that the value of respecting the dead can be realised in different ways. The variety of environments and contexts in which societies exist should render it unsurprising that fundamental or basic moral principles are implemented and expressed in different forms.

Disagreement does not *really* occur if relativism is true. On a subjectivist understanding of relativism the appearance of disagreement may be explained as a clash of attitudes, as one person trying to get the other to stand to the world as he does. However, if we take it that the opposing moral claims of different moral communities can each be true, then if your judgement is true (for you), what could get you alter it? We are agreed on the facts or states to which the judgement is directed. In simply stating opposing views we are of course disagreeing, but there is nothing further to be said. Arguably the hallmark of genuine disagreement is an assumption on the part of the interlocutors that there is a single answer. One (or perhaps both) of us is wrong. If relativism is right then it looks as if it is only by (somehow) moving into a different framework or moral community that I could come to understand the rightness of dog-burning. Universalism might then offer a better account of real disagreement.

Pluralism explains the fact of disagreement better than relativism. Pluralism is the thesis that there is not a single dominant moral criterion (e.g. individual welfare) or value, but that there is an irreducible plurality of morally relevant considerations. There are independent kinds of value, which can pull judgement in different directions depending on context and the perspective of the person deliberating or judging (for a brief discussion see Norman pp 200-201). Disagreement reflects incommensurable and sometimes conflicting values and goods to which moral communities respond and which frame deliberation and judgement.

The role of morality is not just to keep order or stability to, say, facilitate co-operation. That is the role of law. Morality is concerned with the standards of good and right to which law and individual judgement ought to conform and aim.

Let's concede that unlike scientific enquiry of the natural world there is no appearance of a convergence on moral agreement. Perhaps this is because moral questions are particularly difficult. Maybe there is no answer that is accessible to us because of our cognitive and affective limitations. Or, perhaps, certain moral issues are essentially indeterminate or vague. It is neither a cognitive failing nor an indication of relativism that we have not identified or converged on the determinate facts of the matter. More strongly we might deny that there there has been no convergence on moral standards. The idea of moral progress may be a tricky one to accept in a world marred by so much moral horror. However, it is open to the realist to point to the widening of acceptance that there are certain basic standards which frame how we ought to act as an empirical ground for the claim that there is moral development and as an explanation for the judgement that the world could be a morally improved place.

Finally it is worth noting Williams' thought that there is a general problem facing the very idea of meta-ethical relativism. For it is either too late or too early for relativism. Different moral communities are either in contact or not. If they are not then relativism ceases to be an interesting or substantive thesis because there is nothing at stake between them. This allows a sense in which relativism is true. There can be relativism at a distance between two historically distinct cultures. However, if two communities and their outlooks have not encountered each other, then it is too early for any question to arise about their relations to one another and the judgements they form. On the other hand if two communities are in contact with one another, then, according to Williams it is too late for relativism. By dint of being in contact the communities have to some degree become interconnected. It is too late for relativism in the sense that relativism can provide no answers to the question of how groups with different moral outlooks and judgements are to treat each other. Together they form a community which must confront the morally basic questions of what we ought to do and how we ought to be. Only a departure from relativism can help to identify the moral solutions to the questions.

Paul Sheehy  
*Richmond upon Thames College*  
[paul.sheehy@rutc.ac.uk](mailto:paul.sheehy@rutc.ac.uk)

### *Bibliography and further reading*

Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (OUP, 1977)

Krausz and Meiland (eds), *Relativism: Moral and Cognitive* (Notre Dame, 1982) – papers by Williams, Harman and Foot.

John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin, 1977) – see chapter 1 for influential discussion of error theory.

Geoffrey Thomas, *An Introduction to Ethics* (Duckworth, 1993).

Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (CUP, 1993) - short, excellent introduction to key issues.

David Wong, 'Moral Relativism' in Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Blackwell, 1991) – a defence of meta-ethical relativism in a very useful reference work.

---

<sup>1</sup> We call terms (or propositions) contradictories if they cannot both be true and they cannot both be false. So, being alive and being dead cannot be true of anything at the very same time. If I am alive it is impossible for me to be dead, and it is impossible for me to be neither alive nor dead. If I believe that dog burning is wrong, then I cannot also believe that dog burning is right. At this point one might point out that I may just be indifferent to dog-burning in the sense that I do not think it right or wrong, so believing it not to be right need not entail that I believe it to be wrong. Terms are contraries if they cannot both be true, but can both be false. Thus I cannot both love and hate you, but it is possible to



---

neither love nor hate you. I may just be indifferent to you. This is not the kind of case envisaged in the example. The present point is that relativism allows that contradictory beliefs may be held by different communities and each is true.