

UNIT 8

ETHICAL RELATIVISM

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Ethics.....	2
2.1. Ethics as a Normative Field of Study.....	2
2.2. Ethics and Religion.....	2
2.3. Ethics and Law.....	5
3. Ethical Relativism.....	5
3.1. Ethical Absolutism, Ethical Objectivism, Ethical Relativism.....	5
3.2. Two Forms of Ethical Relativism.....	6
4. Arguments for Cultural Relativism.....	7
4.1. Cultural Differences Argument.....	7
4.2. Argument from Moral Skepticism.....	8
5. Arguments for Ethical Objectivism (against Ethical Relativism).....	8
5.1. There Are Some Universals in Codes of Behavior across Cultures.....	8
5.2. Counterintuitive Consequences of Ethical Relativism.....	9
5.3. There Is Less Disagreement than there Seems to Be.....	9

1. Introduction

We have now seen some philosophical discussions in ontology (we considered the question whether God exists from a philosophical perspective) and in epistemology (we considered in particular the question whether skepticism about the external world and about the future is justified). We now turn to the third area of philosophy, viz. ethics. Ethics is the study of values, in particular moral values. In this unit, we will consider the question of ethical relativism, while in the next two units we will discuss two major ethical theories: utilitarianism and Kant's deontological moral theory.

2. Ethics

Before we proceed, let us clarify three points. First, we need to distinguish ethics in the sense we intend here (as a field of study) from ethics understood as a system of beliefs. Second, we need to understand why most (not all) philosophers agree that the study of ethics is independent of religion. Third, we need to understand the difference between ethics and law.

2.1. Ethics as a Normative Field of Study

The term 'ethics' is ambiguous. It sometimes signifies the philosophical discipline that deals with morality. But it also signifies a system of beliefs about what is right or wrong (as in "According to Christian ethics . . ." or "According to Buddhist ethics . . ."). We will be using the term 'ethics' only in the first sense.

Ethics is a normative field investigating broadly conceived morality. An important question ethicists ask is: Is it right to do *X*? One branch of ethics attempts to construct general theories which could give us a principled answer to the above question. In other words, the theories not only aim to tell us what is right but also why it is right.

Ethics deals with human behavior (actions), character, customs, and institutions. But there are two ways of dealing with these: normative and descriptive. Consider two claims:

- (1) It is wrong to kill innocent human beings.
- (2) Innocent human beings are sometimes killed.

Claim (1) is normative – it tells us what the world *should be* or *ought to be* like. Claim (2) is descriptive – it tells us what the world *is* like.

The concern of ethics is always normative (or prescriptive) not descriptive. The concern of disciplines such as psychology or anthropology is descriptive.

2.2. Ethics and Religion

Many religions have developed ethical belief systems (prescribing what constitutes the right behavior). There are also secular ethical belief systems. Religions do not usually offer theories that would explain *why* the behavior prescribed is right (save for it being endorsed by the deity).

There is an old philosophical argument (first proposed by Plato), which is designed to establish that ultimately all ethical questions are independent of religion and must be investigated on their own grounds.

In one of the best know of Platonic dialogues *Euthyphro*, Plato considers the question of what is piety. One of the answers, which he investigates, is that something is pious (or holy) if and only if it is beloved by the gods (let us call it “hypothesis (h)”):

(h) Something is holy if and only if it is beloved by the gods.

Plato thinks that this is an interesting view but raises what looks like an innocent question:

“The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.” (Plato, *Euthyphro*)

In other words, Plato notes that there are two possible ways of thinking about the relation:

- (a) Something is beloved by the gods *because* it is holy.
- (b) Something is holy *because* it is beloved by the gods.

There is a fundamental difference between these two ways of understanding the relation. If the first interpretation (a) is true, i.e. if we agree that the gods love something *because* it is holy, then in effect it looks like we have not given any explanation of why something is holy. It may have sounded like hypothesis (h) is giving some explanation of holiness but if it is interpreted as claim (a) then no explanation of holiness has been given. After all, for us to claim that something is beloved by the gods because it is *holy*, we need to have an understanding of what holiness is. Claim (a) offers no such understanding.

If the second interpretation (b) is true, on the other hand, i.e. if something is holy because it is beloved by the gods then hypothesis (h) does too (at least purport to) explain the nature of holiness. But one has to wonder whether it is an adequate explanation. After all, it looks like holiness is a matter of gods’ whim. If the gods love playing soccer then playing soccer is holy. If the gods love eating cheesecake then eating cheesecake is holy. If the gods love killing one another then killing one another is holy. What is holy then becomes a matter of gods’ whims. And that Plato found objectionable. He thought that there was being holy or not was an objective matter, independent of anyone’s (including gods’) whims.

Plato’s discussion of this issue has been very influential. As I said, there is almost a consensus among philosophers that it shows why ethics is to be investigated on its own grounds, independently of religion. Here is a way of applying Plato’s argument to the so-called Divide Command Theory of morality, according to which morality consists in obedience to God’s commands (let us focus just on the ten commandments). Plato asks us, in effect, which do we believe:

- (A) God prescribed the ten commandments because they are good/right.
- (B) The ten commandments are good/right because God prescribed them.

(If you are inclined to accept (A) *and* (B), please read the framed note. Otherwise, you can skip it for now or for ever. – (A) and (B) are intended in such a way that they do exclude each other: if you think one is true, you can’t think the other is true. However, there is a linguistic ambiguity in (B) such that some people want to accept both (A) and (B). The note identifies two readings of (B) – one of which is compatible with (A), the other not.)

Claim (B) is subject to two readings:

- (B₁) The ten commandments are good/right -- after all, God prescribed them; God would not have prescribed them were they bad/wrong.
- (B₂) The ten commandments were neither good nor right in themselves; they became good/right *when* God prescribed them. It was God's choosing them (without thinking that they are right or good) that made them good/right – because to say that God chose them is to say that they are good/right.

This is a delicate point. Claim (B₂) is the intended reading for (B). ((B₁) is still compatible with (A).) The point is that there is no right or wrong before God's choice. Therefore, from the point of view of what is right or wrong, God's choice is arbitrary – what is right (or wrong) is established only after God makes a choice. It has been objected therefore that accepting (B) (where (B₂) is the intended rendition) renders God's choice of, say, the ten commandments somewhat arbitrary. They were not chosen because they were good, they became good when they were chosen.

Consider a legal analogy to help you understand the original contrast:

- (A') South African parliament abolished the laws of apartheid because they were evil.
- (B') The laws of apartheid are evil because the South African parliament abolished them.

On interpretation (A), God is pictured as consulting the standard of what is good and bad before choosing those prescriptions that are good. On this picture, the ethical categories of good and bad are prior to God's making certain moral prescriptions. On this view, ethics is on a par with mathematics and logic. God obeys not only the laws of mathematics (despite his omnipotence he cannot create a square circle) but also the laws of ethics (he cannot make it the case that what is in fact wrong, as e.g. killing people for fun, be right). If so, however, then ethics is independent of religion.

On interpretation (B), God is pictured as creating the categories of what is good and bad, right and wrong. On this picture, ethics depends on religion because it only comes into being as a result of God's declarations. It has been objected that the picture is in fact contrary to what many believe about God. Take what is expressed in (A) for an example. Many believe that God chose the ten commandments *because* they are good. But this means that God thought about whether they are good or bad *before* choosing them. This cannot have happened if one accepts (B), however. For according to the picture expressed in (B), God could not have considered whether the commandments are good or bad *before* choosing them – it was his choosing them that *made* them good. Moreover, it is sometimes objected that the option expressed by (B) makes it appear as if God's choosing those ten commandments and not a different ten (the contrary ones, for instance, i.e.: "Thou shall kill," "Thou shall commit adultery," etc.) was a matter of fiat. It could not after all have been a matter of God's thinking that they were good (since the category of good is only established with the choice).

These and other concerns have led a great many people toward accepting (A) and treating ethics (at the very general level) as independent of religion.

Note that to treat ethics as independent of religion does not mean that the ethical precepts of a given religion are wrong. It means is that they can be evaluated independently and, of course, that they can be accepted by people who do not share a particular faith. It also means that it is possible to search for an answer to questions such as why certain ethical rules are right beyond pointing to God's having chosen them.

2.3. Ethics and Law

Both ethics and law involve prescriptive normative claims. They both aspire to furthering social harmony. But there are important differences between them.

Ethics is a matter of conscience, whereas law is a matter of covert public action. While the two sometimes overlap (we hope the overlap is greater than not), there are laws of ethics that are not legalized (e.g. there is no law against lying in general – except in legally defined situations, e.g. under oath; there is no law against thinking evil thoughts about others; there is no law about planning murders), and there were (are) laws that were (are) wrong (e.g. legalized slavery, the laws of Apartheid).

3. Ethical Relativism

Perhaps the most prominent version of ethical relativism was cultural relativism, the view that moral principles are relative to a culture. The impetus for the view came through the development of anthropology. Anthropologists began to study other cultures – frequently with the background assumption that they were studying inferior (in particular morally inferior) peoples. As their studies deepened their understanding, they began to reject this assumption and, with it, they began to reject the ethical absolutism, which seems most natural to us.

Let us begin with understanding the basic positions.

3.1. Ethical Absolutism, Ethical Objectivism, Ethical Relativism

Ethical relativism is the doctrine that there are no universal moral laws or principles. All moral principles are relative to cultures/societies/groups of people. (Cultural relativism is the view that moral principles are relative to cultures.)

By contrast, ethical objectivism is the position that there are *at least some* universal moral principles that do not depend on any reference group. So understood ethical objectivism is simply the negation of the ethical relativist view. Ethical objectivism has two versions: strong ethical objectivism (or, ethical absolutism) and weak ethical objectivism.

According to strong ethical objectivism (ethical absolutism), all moral principles are universal in nature – no moral principles depend on any reference group.

According to weak ethical objectivism, some moral principles are universal in nature and do not depend on any reference group, whereas other moral principles do depend on culture/society/group.

These three positions can be represented graphically as in Fig. 1. The views can be represented as different depictions of the relation between the set of moral principles and the set of culture-

specific principles. According to ethical absolutism, the set of moral principles and the set of culture-specific principles have nothing in common. Moral principles are independent of any culture-specific principles on this view. According to ethical relativism (in its most common version of cultural relativism), all moral principles depend on the culture, and so are culture-specific. This does not necessarily mean that all culture-specific principles are moral principles – there may be principles such as table manners, which are culture-specific but have little to do with morality. Thus, according to ethical relativism, the set of moral principles is a subset of the set of culture-specific principles. The remaining position, weak ethical objectivism lies between these two extremes. According to the weak ethical objectivist, there are some moral principles that are independent of culture and some moral principles that are dependent on culture.

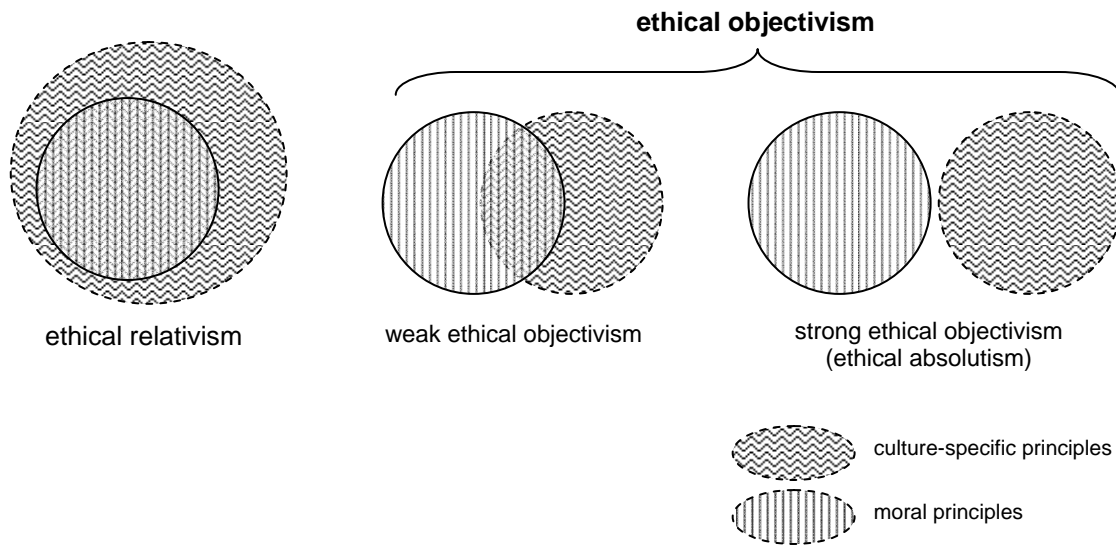


Fig. 1. The representation of ethical relativism and ethical objectivism (see text for explanation)

3.2. Two Forms of Ethical Relativism

There are two main types of ethical relativism: personalism and conventionalism.

On the conventionalist view, moral principles are relative a social group/society/culture. When people use the term ‘ethical relativism’, they usually mean conventionalism. This is in part because the personalist view is extremely problematic, as you will soon see. After this section, I will use the term ‘ethical relativism’ interchangeably with ‘conventionalism’.

On the personalist view, moral principles are relative to a person. This view is sometimes expressed in ordinary conversations especially when one does not see how to resolve a moral debate one is engaged in. One then often hears such declarations as “What is moral for me is not moral for you” or “This is so according to my morality”. Contrary to appearances, the personalist view has such horrible consequences that it is rejected by most ethicists. Moreover, even if you now seem to think that the view is reasonable, you will change your view by the end of this section.

Personalism is sometimes thought to be a self-defeating position. Let us suppose (in making this supposition, we will be engaging in a kind of thought experiment) that all of us in this class (including me) are personalists. Now suppose that I announce today that all of you – independently of how you were doing in this class so far – are going to get an F for your final grade. In other words, I would fail *all* of you. What would be your reaction?

Well, you would tell me, in a more or less calm fashion, that what I have done is **UNFAIR!** I had no reason to do it.

But as a personalist, I've got a ready reply: "What is unfair according to your morality, is fair according to mine." (Moreover, I might have very good reasons to fail you. For example, I might think that failing you all would help you get a perspective on just how important grades are in the grand scheme of things.)

It is very unlikely that you would be satisfied by my response. You would want to press the point that what I have done is unfair, that failing you all would be fair only in the situation if you had deserved it by how well (or poorly in this case) you were doing in this course. – But this reply is unintelligible *on the assumption* that we are all personalists. You have no way of convincing or arguing with me about what is the right thing to do. I have my own way, you have your own way. If they don't match, so be it.

In your reaction (which will be the more intense the more you actually believe me), you betray the fact that your gut intuitions tell you that you are *not* a personalist. In fact, those intuitions reveal that in the interpersonal character lies in the very nature of moral concepts. One of the functions of ethical thinking is to facilitate, improve and harmonize our relations with others. Personalism annihilates this function of moral discourse altogether. Indeed, it is arguable that there is nothing of it left over. All there is in personalism is an individual's opinion concerning moral matters.

Still, there may be a healthy thought behind the appeal of personalism. Here is one such: every individual has a right to choose their own views moral or otherwise. But one can accept such thoughts without being a personalist.

4. Arguments for Cultural Relativism

You should treat the following two sections as brief summaries of some of the arguments presented in James Rachels's text. You should read his text, before or after, reading these notes.

4.1. Cultural Differences Argument

- (1) Different cultures have different moral codes.
- (2) Moral opinions vary from culture to culture.
- (3) Neither opinion is right or wrong.

There is no objective truth in morality.

The main problem with the argument is the transition from (2) to (3). From the fact that opinions vary it does not yet follow that neither is right or wrong. If your opinion concerning the time you were invited to Thanksgiving's Dinner varies from that of your brother, it does yet mean that neither of you is right or wrong. If opinions vary concerning whether the theory of

evolution provides an accurate reconstruction of our past, this in itself does not show that there is no right answer. If so, then the argument certainly does not establish that there are no objective moral principles.

4.2. Argument from Moral Skepticism

- (1) Our moral opinions are determined by our culture's moral code.
 - (2) We cannot take an extra-cultural stance.
-

We cannot know that there are objective moral laws.

Note that the conclusion here is not quite the view of ethical relativism for ethical relativism involves the claim that there are no objective (culture-independent) moral laws. Here the claim is weaker, viz. that we cannot know that there are objective moral laws. The argument does undercut our confidence in ethical objectivism but this by itself does not yet constitute an argument for ethical relativism.

Still, the argument is not unproblematic. The transition from premise (1) to premise (2) is questionable. It is certainly not the case that (2) follows from (1). The most that follows from (1) is that pre-reflectively, we *do not* take an extra-cultural stance. It does not follow that we *cannot* do so. There are at least two reasons to think that even if it is the case that our moral opinions are determined by our culture, it still might be possible for us to take an extra-cultural stance. First, moral beliefs are not the only beliefs we acquire in virtue of our upbringing. Most children grow in the unquestionable belief that their parents know what is good for them. Come teenage years – this belief is rejected flat out. Come mid-life crisis – it is reconsidered again. We grow up in the belief that the sun moves around the Earth (it is very hard to resist its empirical obviousness). But we eventually reject this belief too. Why could moral beliefs not be revised as well?

☯ Can you think of moral beliefs that you have already changed your mind about?

☯ Do you think this is a good rebuttal? Or, is there something that the relativist can say here?)

Moreover, there are some attempts to understand what is moral that do not appear to depend on culture in any obvious way. (See for example, the evolutionary account discussed by Rachels. We will also discuss two major theories of what is moral in the next two units.)

5. Arguments for Ethical Objectivism (against Ethical Relativism)

5.1. There Are Some Universals in Codes of Behavior across Cultures

There are certain behavior patterns that a society must reject by and large: killing, abusing the young, lying, breaking promises or other commitments, etc. The society must guard against them at its own peril. Were the society not to establish some rules against such behaviors, the society itself would cease to exist. For example, if killing (at a whim) were permitted, the members of the society might eventually all die. And even if they did not die, they could not trust each other

(they could not trust that the other guy is not about to kill them). Lack of trust at such a basic level is already tantamount to the dissolution of a society – all one may feel like doing is “emigrate”. So, it is argued, there are some rules that all societies must accept if they are to remain in existence. These constitute the foundation of the objective moral rules that are independent of cultures.

Note that the argument only establishes that there must be a presumption against killing, lying, etc. It is still compatible with their being exceptions to those rules that are dependent on cultures.

- ☯ For further reflection: What makes such rules moral? Even if one grants that all societies must accept some rules, why should they count as moral? The same argument presumably would work for eating. If people do not eat, they will die, and so their society will cease to exist. Are we to conclude that there ought to be a moral law that people *should* eat and drink and procreate?

5.2. Counterintuitive Consequences of Ethical Relativism

It has been argued that ethical relativism is to be rejected because it leads to certain counterintuitive consequences, which we cannot accept – among them:

- No customs of other societies/cultures can be subject to moral evaluation. So, anti-Semitism, slavery, apartheid, if accepted by a society/culture cannot be deemed morally wrong.
- Correlatively, the customs of our society/culture cannot be subjected to moral evaluation. If slavery, political oppression of minorities, etc. are accepted by our society, they are right.
- Only limited moral progress is possible – only to the extent of accomplishing the ideals held by the society but not yet realized.

The point here is this: If one is an ethical relativist, these are the consequences one has to accept. But these consequences are counterintuitive. It is extremely hard to accept that slavery or anti-Semitism are not wrong (if another society accepts them). Therefore, one should not be an ethical relativist.

The relativist rejoinder: The argument does not work. It relies on the fact that the relativist has no way of evaluating the practices of other societies, e.g. that we cannot say that anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany was morally wrong. But this is not the case. Surely, *we can* say that anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany was morally wrong (from our point of view).

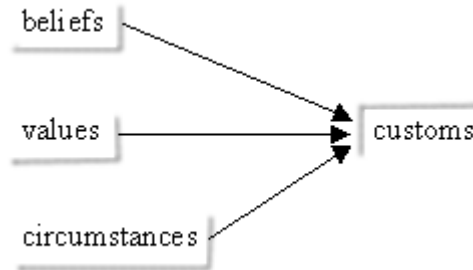
- ☯ How good is this response, do you think? Would this count as a moral evaluation? Or is something missing there?

5.3. There Is Less Disagreement than there Seems to Be

The ethical relativist begins with the premise that customs of different cultures differ. He draws the preliminary conclusion that the values that are expressed by those customs differ as well. It is

the difference in moral values (not just a difference in customs or behavior patterns), which is central to the ethical relativist claim.

The problem is that the relation between customs and values is not straightforward. There are at least two other factors that enter the picture:



In other words, differences in customs can be due to differences in values, but also to differences in beliefs or in the circumstances in which the culture finds itself.

Differences in customs can be due to differences in beliefs. Hinduism prohibits the eating of cows. Rachels argues that this only appears to reflect a difference in values because it is also believed that people reincarnate and that human souls may enter cows after death. Given this belief, the eating of a cow might be like eating a human. So the values coincide: both cultures prohibit eating humans, but they differ in their beliefs what might count as a human.

Differences in customs can be due to differences in circumstances. (See Rachels' detailed explanation of why the Eskimos commit infanticide, mostly on baby-girls.) He shows that it is the harsh environment and other circumstances (among others, presumably, lack of birth control methods) that leads to the infanticide. He argues that the explanation and some other facts (such as the fact that parents are willing to give up some of the newborns for adoption rather than killing them) shows that in fact the Eskimos' values do not differ from our own: we both cherish children.

- ☯ For further thought: Are you convinced that the values do not differ in these particular cases? Concerning the first case, reincarnation is in fact believed to occur not only between human beings and cows. Does that change anything? Concerning the second case: Are you convinced that there is no difference in values? What if the circumstances changed? Is there a difference between explanation and justification?