
Cultural Relativism and the Nature of Morality

All of us have to make moral decisions in life. Such decisions may be of smaller overall impact such as whether to pay for an entrance ticket if one can get away without paying, to much larger issues including our stand on abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia or capital punishment. Morality, from the Latin word *moralis*, is concerned with which actions are right or wrong. The cultural relativist (or ethical relativist) holds that it is the attitudes of the culture in which one lives that determine what is right and wrong.

The first part of this article will explore the implication that deep moral differences between cultures infers that there is no such thing as *absolute morality*; no objective and universal moral truth. The nature of morality is that it is culturally conditioned and learnt. This in turn has implications for our current way of life where, through global communication and transportation, cultures are no longer as isolated as they once were. The second part of this article will consider ‘how different are the differences? Are they as ‘deep’ as they might initially appear? And does deep necessarily imply fundamental?

It is interesting to note that the Concise Oxford Dictionary has no definition for the word ‘culture’ in an ethnic or group sense. For the purposes of this article I will define ‘culture’ as a common way of life shared by a group of people, maintained over many generations and not related to a particular individual or circumstances. I will assume that a ‘culture’ has a set of codes, or general moral principles, by which to ‘live’. Each such set of codes is assumed to be undeviating. That is, for each act there is only one moral evaluation assigned – the act is either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.

Thus, an act is morally right if and only if it is permitted by the conventions of its culture. (Feldman 1978, p164)

Moral codes appear to vary from one society to another and from one period of time to another. Further, different groups within a complex society may also exhibit different moral beliefs. (Mackie 1977) Quite simply, what is right in one culture may not be right in another.

*Since the time of Herodotus, enlightened observers have been accustomed to the idea that conceptions of right and wrong differ from culture to culture. If we assume that **our** ideas of right and wrong will be shared by all peoples at all times, we are merely naïve. (Rachels 1999, p 21)*

Thus, the existence of different moral standards in different cultures is acknowledged. “From here it is only a short step to the view that there can be no objective right and wrong, beyond the bounds of one’s own culture.” (Kuhse & Singer 1999, p2).

As water is to the fish, and air to the bird, so our culture is to us. Conditioned into our moral sense we assume that our ‘morality’ is natural, right and superior to all others. However, as cited by Kuhse and Singer, the implication of morality being relative to

culture, is that no culture can have any basis for regarding its morality as superior to any other culture. This in turn implies that when members of two different cultures disagree about a moral issue there can be no resolution to the disagreement. To illustrate, consider Culture X that has a set of complete and consistent principles by which to live. These principles permit racism, slavery, exploitation of child labour, the subservience of women, and aggressive warfare. Contrast this with Culture Y, which also has a complete and consistent set of conventions, based on the dignity of all human beings regardless of race or gender or age.

What are the implications for a member of Culture X who questions whether it really is morally right to exploit children for their cheap labour. This would-be-moral-reformer's question could simply be answered by showing that for many generations children had performed such 'work'. There would be no way for the reformer to say that the accepted custom was wrong. The nature of morality in this case is that it is inflexible; any 'moral progress' within this culture is severely limited, if not impossible.

If cultural relativism is accepted, then it is impossible to say that Culture Y is right and superior to Culture X, which is wrong. Culture Y may be more aligned to our moral code, but the implication of the non-existence of objective moral truth is that "*our own code has no special status; it is merely one among many*". (Rachels 1999, p22)
"*Bearing in mind that some cultures have practiced slavery, or the burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands, this is hard to accept.*" (Kuhse & Singer 1999 p2)

Suppose that a member of Culture Y was visiting Culture X. There they witness a young girl being circumcised. They are appalled and insist that it is not right to perform such a mutilation. However, the people of Culture X insist that this is their custom. Simply stated:

In culture X: Female circumcision is morally right.

In culture Y: Female circumcision is morally wrong.

This appears to be a straightforward case of moral conflict. However, if the conflict is expressed as "Female circumcision is morally right in culture X" and "Female circumcision is morally wrong in Culture Y", then both of these statements can be true together, and hence there is apparently no conflict. Yet there clearly is a conflict. If Cultural Relativism is correct there is no standard by which an act may be judged 'inter-culturally'. Clearly this leads to problems where cultures come into contact.

On Friday April 7th 2000, a 34 year old Iraqi man was jailed for eleven years for the abduction and rape of a teenage school girl in a suburb of Wellington, New Zealand. Abdulhussein Shihad Abdulhussein's defence was on the grounds of cultural differences.

From his perspective, a female out at night on her own might be available for a sexual liaison. It was completely at odds with New Zealand thinking, but culturally New Zealand and Iraq werelike "Earth and Mars". (Evening Post 7/4/2000 appendix).

We are now a 'global society'. By whose standards, then do we judge moral behaviour? Is the nature of morality "when in Rome, do as the Roman's do?" or is the nature of morality to be global? By what standards will behaviour be judged as we become more and more multicultural in our own communities, and world-wide?

To summarise these last two points:

There is no logical connection between what you have a right to do, and the right thing to do. (Norton 1999).

It does make sense to condemn some practices, such as slavery and anti-Semitism, wherever they occur. It makes sense to think that our own society has made some moral progress, while admitting that it is still imperfect and in need of reform. (Rachels 1999, p27)

As already stated, the existence of deep moral differences between cultures suggests that morality is learnt and conditioned, rather than objective and innate. The implication is that different cultures live in different moral worlds. But do they really? How *different* are the differences, and how *deep* are the differences? The judgement of *differences* is a value judgement in itself.

I contend that there are two fundamentals, not necessarily of morality, but of human nature. Firstly human beings are essentially selfish. Secondly, human beings are social animals. These two fundamentals are in conflict with each other. When we live in community we must constantly battle with ourselves to overcome or veneer our selfishness. "*..the two urges, the one towards personal happiness and the other towards union with other human beings must struggle with each other in every individual*" (Sigmund Freud, cited Singer).

Morality, through its laws and principles, and their consequent rewards and punishments, set boundaries for our behaviour which maximise our personal benefit and pleasure. Given that selfishness and sociability are universal human characteristics, it is reasonable to contend that wherever a group of people came together some sort of morality came into being to mediate between these two fundamentals of human nature. It is therefore possible that similar underlying moral principles developed within all different cultures. The key here is 'underlying moral principles'. While the expression of these principles may differ between societies, it may, as Rachels (1999, p30) points out, be "*a mistake to overestimate the amount of difference between cultures.*"

Take for example, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. All three 'cultures' share the essential underlying idea that people should live by the moral standard of "Do unto others as you would have done unto you". It is in the how we want to be treated 'unto us' that differences arise, and even here there may be surface differences, but underlying similarities. Perhaps (as cited in Barnsley 1972, p338) "*cultural relativism applies to the derived, rather than basic values and precepts of different societies*". Barnsley uses an example to illustrate this point. In some primitive cultures children believe they should put their parents to death before they get old. Western culture would not agree with this. However, these primitive people believe this because they think their parents will be better off in the 'hereafter' if they enter it while they are still able-bodied. The 'children' are motivated by the ethic that

they should do the best they can for their parents. This is an ethic with which Western culture has no conflict. The difference between the two cultures is in factual rather than ethical belief.

Similarly, Feldman (1978, p161) cites the case of the Smith family whose culture teaches that eating meat is morally right, and the Jones family whose culture teaches that eating meat will cause great suffering in hell. Both families act in such a way as to maximise their personal pleasure (reward) and minimise their suffering (punishment) as it is in their selfish interests to do so. Thus, Feldman states, “*though they agree about the ultimate principle of morality, they disagree about the morality of eating meat.*”

The point is that many factors work together to produce the customs of a society. The society's values are only one of them. Other matters, such as the religious and factual beliefs held by its members, and the physical circumstances in which they must live, are also important. We cannot conclude, then, merely because customs differ, that there is a disagreement about values. (Rachels 1999, p28)

To support this contention that due to our essentially selfish, yet social natures, all cultures will have some common values, we must look for examples which we can argue will evolve wherever people form societies. An obvious example would seem to be ‘thou shalt not kill each other’. No society in which its members were free to kill each other could survive. People would be in a constant state of insecurity. It would be in a person's selfish interests to avoid other people as much as possible, and yet this would be in direct conflict with their need to be social.

Of course, people might band together in smaller groups with others that they could trust not to harm them. But notice what this means: They would be forming smaller societies that did acknowledge a rule against murder. The prohibition of murder, then, is a necessary feature of all societies. (Rachels 1999, p30)

Rachels (1999) also cites the fact that all human infants are born helpless and dependent, unable to survive unless they are given extensive care for a period of years. All cultures must, therefore, nurture (value) their young if that culture wishes to survive. “*Infants that are not cared for must be the exception rather than the rule.*” (p29)

Similarly, Rachels cites truth telling as a universal value for any culture or society. There must be a presumption that someone is speaking truthfully when you are in communication with them. If the person were simply to say the first thing that came into their head there would be no reason to pay attention to their answer, nor would there have been any point in asking the question in the first place. Society cannot exist without communication between its members.

Some apparently universal moral codes have been discussed. However, their existence does not necessarily mean the existence of objective moral truth. Rather, it is my contention that humans exhibit behaviour based on their fundamentally selfish, yet social, nature. Wherever ‘two or more have gathered’, a moral code has had to develop to mediate

between the consequent conflict of these two fundamentals of human nature. A thin substratum of similar moral values has therefore developed simultaneously within all 'cultures'. This basic substratum of similar moral values has then been interpreted through the religious beliefs, scientific beliefs and environmental restrictions of the particular society, leading to the rich differences in individual customs and beliefs exhibited between cultures. Different customs and different moral standards are taught and conditioned into the members of each culture, but the substratum of fundamental values remains beneath.

Acknowledging the superficial to deep continuum of cultural differences that exist, the question of how this will affect the nature of morality as we become an increasingly 'global culture' has been posed.

Like Greece in the fifth century, our own century is an epoch of change, although on a vastly wider scale. Now all societies participate in a world-wide transition. And the revolution in transportation and communications entails a new interdependence; each society is to a greater or lesser extent influenced by the changes occurring in the others. There can be little doubt, therefore, that in our time the issue of relativism is of great practical importance. (Barnsley 1972, p324).

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- Appendix:*
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