

Moral Relativism

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In philosophical discussions, the term “moral relativism” is primarily used to denote the metaethical thesis that the correctness of moral judgements is relative to some interesting factor, for example, relative to an individual’s or group’s moral norms.

Outside philosophy, for example in anthropology, sociology or ethnology, “moral relativism” can also denote the thesis that there is significant cross-cultural or interpersonal diversity as to the moral values that are accepted or adhered to—following Brandt (1967), this is often called “descriptive moral relativism”. Also following Brandt, a further sense of “moral relativism” is often distinguished and labelled “normative moral relativism”. Unlike metaethical moral relativism, normative moral relativism is supposed to involve ethical and not just metaethical claims, such as, for example, that what an individual (or a group) considers morally right or wrong to do, is in fact right or wrong for them to do. Given the general implausibility of such claims, this sense of the term seems to be linked to the frequent polemical or derogatory use of the term, in which it is taken for granted that moral relativism is a position that ought to be avoided (e.g. Ratzinger 1996).

Serious philosophical discussion of moral relativism has no need for the derogatory notion, and it is only indirectly concerned with empirical descriptive theses of cross-cultural or interpersonal divergence of moral views, namely in so far as they are sometimes adduced as evidence for metaethical moral relativism. Hence this article focusses on the metaethical thesis that the correctness of moral judgements is relative to, for example, individuals or groups, or their systems of value.

1. The Core Thesis of Moral Relativism

What exactly do moral relativists claim? For illustration, let us consider an example (adapted from Wong 2006). A Chinese mother, Ai, opens a letter addressed to her teenage daughter Bao, written by Bao’s American boyfriend Carl. Ai thinks she has a right to know about her daughter’s love life, while Carl thinks this violates Bao’s privacy. Ai’s view is supported by her culture and values, while Carl’s view is supported by his own culture and values. A moral relativist might say that the judgement that Ai ought not to open the letter is correct relative to Carl’s system of values, and that at the same time, the same judgement (that Ai ought not to open the letter) is not correct relative to Ai’s system of values. The moral relativist claims not only that the correctness of moral judgements can in this way depend on a thinker, or on the value system relevant to the thinker, but also that there is no privileged correct value system (or a thinker who is the ultimate authority).

The claim is not just that some will accept Carl’s judgement, and some will reject it, or that those adhering to a certain value system will accept Carl’s judgement, while those with a different value system will reject it, but rather that it will be correct for some to accept the judgement, while for others it will be correct to reject it.

The relativist’s core claim is thus:

(MR) (a) Some moral judgements are correct (true) relative to one and not correct (true) relative to another thinker (or value system); and (b) there is no unique authoritative thinker (or unique admissible value system) by which the correctness of all moral judgements must be assessed.

(MR) captures a common core upon which many of those who discuss moral relativism seriously would agree (for example Harman 1975, 2015; Wong 1984, 2006; Dreier 1990; Copp 1995; Phillips 1997; Prinz 2007; Stevenson 1963; Brandt 1967; Lyons 1976; Horgan and Timmons 2006). But the common core leaves room for quite significant variation.

To start with, two alternative formulations, involving “correct” and “true”, respectively, are offered here because the issues addressed by relativists may arise independently of the question whether moral judgements are truth-apt: both theorists who think that moral judgements are truth-apt and those who don’t, might accept moral relativism.

Secondly, the factor on which the correctness of moral judgements is claimed to depend may vary. Some types of relativist may claim that it depends on certain psychological characteristics of the judge (e.g. Prinz 2007), others claim that it depends on sociological facts about the judge, e.g. which society the judge belongs to or his or her cultural or educational background (Harman 1975). Yet others may think that correctness depends on the psychological or sociological characteristics of any *agent* whose potential actions the judgement concerns (in our example: Ai), rather than the judge (Wong 1984). Accordingly, we may speak of *individual vs cultural relativism* or of *appraiser- vs agent-relativism*. Some combine all of these and claim that the correctness of a given moral judgement can depend on both the judge’s and the agent’s psychology, as well as some sociological facts about both (Harman 1975, Phillips 1997). Note also that (MR) is compatible with, but does not require, that there are moral judgements that are true relative to all thinkers or all admissible value systems. Thus (MR) also captures the views of moral relativists, like Wong (1984, 2006), who impose significant constraints on admissible value systems and thereby make room for some absolute moral truths.

2. Understanding the Relativity Thesis

What exactly does it mean to say that the correctness of moral judgements is “relative” to some factor? In order to clarify this, let us consider an example of a non-moral judgement which might similarly be said to involve a kind of relativity. Suppose Marie is in Paris and María is in Barcelona. Consider Marie’s judgement that the river Seine is near, and Maria’s judgement that the river Seine is near. It seems clear that Marie judges correctly and María does not. Thus we might conclude that there is a proximity judgement—the judgement that the Seine is near—that is correct for one thinker and not correct for another thinker, or correct in one, but not correct in another location. This results in the *prima facie* plausible thesis of “proximity relativism”:

(PR) (a) Some proximity judgements are correct (true) relative to one and not correct (true) relative to another thinker (or location); and (b) there is no unique authoritative thinker (or unique correct location) by which the correctness of all proximity judgements must be assessed.

If we want to count Marie's and María's judgement that the Seine is near as a confirming instance of (PR), then we have to count Marie and María as in some sense making the *same* judgement. There are several ways of making sense of this. One way is to say that the sentence "The Seine is near.", and its translations into other languages, is *context-sensitive* (see Content, indexical; Demonstratives and indexicals) and can therefore be used to say different things (to assert different *propositional contents*) in different contexts (see Propositional attitudes; Propositions, sentences and statements). On this view, Marie's and María's judgements have different propositional contents: In Marie's case the content that the Seine is near Marie's location, which is true, and in María's case the content that the Seine is near María's location, which is false. Thus, on this first view, proximity contents are absolutely true or false. What is relative to, or depends on, a location, is the correctness of using the *sentence* "The Seine is near." or a translation of it. We can call this view "indexical relativism" about proximity.

Another way of making sense of (PR) is to say that the propositional content of the two judgements is the same: María's and Marie's judgements both represent the same thing (the Seine) as having the same characteristic (nearness). Accordingly, one might want to capture this similarity by saying that their judgements have the same propositional content. However, given that it depends on one's location whether it is correct to attribute nearness to a given thing, this shared content is of a kind such that the correctness of believing it depends on the believer's location: it is correct for Marie to believe it, incorrect for María. On this view, the truth of propositional contents can depend on location. We can call this view "invariant relativism" about proximity.

There may be further or more differentiated ways of making sense of relativity claims (see MacFarlane 2014 for a comprehensive discussion), but the distinction between indexical and invariant relativism suffices for current purposes.

The moral relativists' core thesis (MR) gives rise to an analogous distinction. Consider the judgement discussed above (see §1) that it is wrong for Ai to open the letter. The core relativist claim, instantiating (MR), is that it is correct for Carl to make that judgement, while it is incorrect for Ai to make it (for Ai it is correct to judge that it is not wrong for her to open the letter. For Carl's (or his culture's) values require that privacy be respected, while Ai's (her culture's) values do not require this. However, this core claim can be implemented in the indexical and the invariant way.

The indexical version says that this is merely a phenomenon of context-sensitive or indexical language: the sentence

(S1) It is wrong for Ai to open the letter.

can be used to say different things on different occasions of use. When used by Carl, it expresses the true proposition that Carl's (or his society's) value system requires Ai not to open the letter. When used by Ai, it expresses the false proposition that Ai's (or her society's) value system requires Ai not to open the letter. The (alleged) fact that the sentence is indexical in this way is not obvious, because it is not as obvious that "wrong" is context-sensitive as it is that "near" is context-sensitive. This masks the fact that the judgements expressed by the sentence on different occasions may not have the same content, i.e. may not attribute the same characteristic to the same entity. In particular, the propositions expressed respectively by Carl and Ai when using (S1) are distinct: one incorrectly attributes the characteristic of being required by Ai's

system of values, while the other correctly attributes the characteristic of being required by Carl's. Our description of Carl's and Ai's judgement as "the judgement that it is wrong for Ai to open the letter" falsely suggests that their judgements have the same content (just as one might claim that the description of Marie's and María's judgement as "the judgement that Paris is near" falsely suggests that they make judgements with the same content).

The invariant moral relativist, by contrast, will claim that this description is not misleading. For Carl's and Ai's judgement do indeed share the same propositional content: the content that it is wrong for Ai to open the letter. The propositional content expressed by the sentence (S1) is invariant: it does not change from one occasion of use to another (except, perhaps, because of a context-dependence in "the letter"). However, this invariant content has a variable truth-value: it is true as evaluated with respect to Carl's system of values, while false as evaluated with respect to Ai's system of values.

Propositional contents that it may be correct to believe for one person at one time, but not correct for another person or at another time (also called *de se propositions*, or *centered propositions*), are controversial in contemporary philosophy (see Kölbel 2015 for discussion), thus invariant relativism is usually regarded as more radical than indexical relativism. But from the point of view of the core metaethical thesis, they make the same claim: that it depends on a system of values whether it is correct to judge that a given action is wrong—even if the sentences used to express our judgements about what is wrong do not make explicit reference to value systems.

3. Some Motivations

Moral relativism is often motivated by the observation of cross-cultural and intra-cultural divergence in moral views. While the members of one society regard it as morally wrong to meet one's mother-in-law, members of other societies regard this as morally permitted (Prinz 2007). While some members of a society regard abortion as morally permitted, other members of the same society regard it as morally wrong.

Why should this observation of divergences in views motivate relativism? There are many other issues on which there are divergences in view, and where we would not infer relativism. For example, there might be a controversy about whether a certain vaccination is harmful to babies. Many believe that it is harmful, while many believe that it is not harmful but beneficial. This does not show that it is relative to some personal feature of the believers whether the vaccination is harmful. Rather, what the divergence in views shows is that different people have access to different evidence, or that some people process the evidence incorrectly. (Yet others do not even base their views directly on evidence, but believe what they are told by those who do claim to have considered the evidence.) These differences can explain the divergence in beliefs. Indeed, they may explain why one group has incorrect beliefs.

However, in the case of the observed divergences in moral views, it is often claimed that they cannot be explained by such factors. In the example in §1, if most Americans think that Ai should not open the letter, while most Chinese believe that she may, then it seems unlikely that this is because one group lacks relevant information, or processes information incorrectly and is therefore massively wrong about the issue. Moral relativism allows one to avoid the implausible attribution of inexplicable massive error. According to the indexical moral relativist, the judgements of one group are about the requirements of one value system, while the

judgements of the other group are about the requirements of a different value system. According to the invariant relativist the judgements of both groups alike concern what agents are required to do, however, the correctness of these judgements depends on different value systems. This does not guarantee that everyone is judging correctly. But it explains the massive divergence of views (cf. Wong 1984; 2006, who also claims that moral relativism explains the phenomenon of “moral ambivalence” experienced by those under the influence of different value systems).

A related consideration is pragmatic: moral relativism permits us to regard the divergent moral judgements prevalent in foreign societies as largely correct, thus permitting us to understand these societies. Moral absolutism would force us to regard these judgements as erroneous, thus preventing proper understanding and promoting cultural chauvinism.

Moral relativism can also be motivated by wider metaphysical concerns. Often, metaphysical naturalists take it to be incompatible with naturalism that there should be moral properties and relations, such as moral goodness or wrongness, or moral requirements. Similarly, the corresponding moral facts—facts to the effect that some things possess moral properties or stand in moral relations—are deemed unacceptable by naturalists. This provides a straightforward motivation for indexical forms of moral relativism. The naturalist may not regard it as problematic that there should be facts to the effect that certain norms, rules or systems of value should require certain courses of action. The rule or norm that prohibits treading on the lawn requires John not to tread on the lawn (treading on the lawn would violate the norm)—so much is naturalistically unproblematic (assuming that norm exegesis is unproblematic in this case). Harman’s (1975) and Dreier’s (1990) indexical moral relativism can be motivated in this way: both claim that moral sentences are context-sensitive, and that the propositional contents of moral judgements, when made fully explicit, concern what certain of an agent’s motivating attitudes require the agent to do. In effect, this proposal amounts to a form of naturalistic reduction. Invariant moral relativism does not seem to offer such a reduction, and it is not immediately clear whether invariant moral relativism will also avoid unwanted commitments to non-natural facts or properties. However, the invariant relativist may argue that naturalistic facts fully determine which moral judgements are correct (for example along the lines of Gibbard 2010).

Some moral relativists also claim to solve another longstanding metaethical problem, the problem of moral motivation. The problem is that some metaethicists regard moral judgements as providing, by themselves, motives for action (See Moral motivation §3). However, if moral judgements are simply beliefs about how the world is (as moral cognitivists claim – see Moral judgment), how could they be motives? The indexical moral relativist believes that moral judgements are beliefs about what some motivational attitudes (a value system, some norms, etc) require a given agent to do. According to Harman (1975) and Dreier (1990), it is also a conceptual requirement on moral judgements that the judge possess the motivational attitudes that the judgement is about. This provides an explanation for why moral judgements motivate: if I judge that I ought to do D, I am judging about certain motivational attitudes—*attitudes that I have*—that they require me to act in a certain way. Even though the judgement’s content (that the attitudes require the action) is not in itself motivational, there is still a requirement that the judge have the attitudes which, together with the judgement, provide a motive.

Yet another motivation comes from considerations about the social purpose of moral thought. It may be argued that while the purpose of moral thought imposes some constraints on what can count as an admissible system of values, these constraints do not determine a unique admissible such system (see Foot 1978, Copp 1995, Wong 1984, 2006). Moral relativism can recognize this by saying that a moral judgement is correct if it recommends a course of action that is required by the agent's system of values, and this system is admissible.

4. Some Objections

Some argue that the diversity of moral views does not show, as some relativists claim, that the correctness of the views depends on who holds them, but rather that these views deal in different concepts (Cooper 1978). Suppose that there is a standard translation of what members of the Gisu society say, and according to the standard translation, they tend to say that meeting one's mother in law is morally wrong. Then what we should conclude is neither that they are spectacularly mistaken, nor that wrongness is relative, but rather that the standard translation is wrong. The word in question expresses a different concept (perhaps a concept we don't have in our repertoires).

Indexical relativists can reply that in effect their view *does* entail that the concepts are different: since "wrong", as well as its translation in Lugisu, are context-dependent, in Gisu mouths it expresses the concept of being prohibited by Gisu values, while it expresses the concept of being prohibited by our values in our mouths. Thus the translation is good after all and does not militate against considerations of charity.

Invariant relativists can reply that from the point of view of charity their view is appropriate (the Gisu have largely correct views and their views are explicable), and more appropriate than the view that wrongness is an absolute concept and that consequently either we or the Gisu are spectacularly mistaken. Invariant relativists can also invoke a similarity between the emotional states that go along with our wrongness judgements and the presumed wrongness judgements of the Gisu. If the psychological role of concepts plays a role in their individuation, then this surely speaks in favour of the concepts being the same (see Prinz 2007).

Sometimes it is argued that invariant moral relativism is incoherent for the following reason (e.g. Lyons 1976, Boghossian 2010). Returning to our earlier example (see §1), if we want to say that Carl's judgement that it is wrong for Ai to open the letter is true (correct), while Ai's judgement that it is not wrong for her to open the letter is also true (correct), then the principle that one can infer p from "it is true that p " forces us to accept that it is both wrong and not wrong for Ai to open the letter—a contradiction.

The moral relativist can reply that there is a difference between assessing a particular moral judgement, such as Carl's or Ai's, as correct (or true with respect to the relevant parameter, e.g. Carl's or Ai's value system), and accepting the content of that judgement. Thus, we may regard Ai's judgement as correct (because it is true relative to her value system) without thereby being committed to the content of her judgement, namely the proposition that it is not wrong for Ai to open the letter.

Sometimes it is objected to indexical forms of moral relativism that their linguistic analysis is problematic. The sentences we use to express moral judgements, such as

(S1) It is wrong for Ai to open the letter.

do not behave like typical indexicals or context-sensitive expressions. For example, we do not make adjustments to a changed context when reporting someone's use of (S1). Moreover, a normal reply by Ai to Carl's utterance of (S1) would be

(S2) No, it's not wrong.

However, this would not be a normal response to a transparently context-sensitive sentence such as

(S3) My value system requires Ai not to open the letter.

Quite the opposite, it would seem that Ai can accept what Carl says with an utterance of (S3), and this acceptance is compatible with her view that it is not wrong for her to open the letter (cf. Phillips 1997, Kölbel 2005).

The indexical moral relativist can reply that her claim is not that (S1) and (S3) have the same meaning, even though perhaps, they express judgements with the same propositional content, when used by by the same person. There may be further differences in the meaning (such as generalized implicatures or presuppositions) that account for the cited behaviour of (S1).

Diffuse pragmatic worries are sometimes voiced against moral relativism. It is sometimes said that moral relativism might lead to people taking morality less seriously, or even to loose morals. However, metaethics seeks to uncover the truth about moral judgements, not to select a theory that serves some other purposes, such as having good behavioral effects. Thus, the worry is not a reason against moral relativism. Besides, it is far from clear that moral relativism can be made responsible for anyone taking morality less seriously. It may well be true that ever since people have been confronted with the diverging moral views of others, this has led them to question their own moral views. If this is an undesired outcome: blame modern travel and communication systems. Arguably, if we can provide a credible explanation of our moral thought and discourse that explains its social role and shows how we can justify our moral views, then this will lead to morality being taken more seriously than if its metaphysical and epistemological status is left obscure and mysterious.

5. Issues of Classification

The fairly rough definition of moral relativism that we have been working with, (MR), is motivated by the writings of those contemporary philosophers who declare themselves to be moral relativists, such as Harman (1975, 2015); Wong (1984, 2006); Dreier (1990); Copp (1995); Phillips (1997); Prinz (2007). (See §1 for the definition.)

It is interesting to consider how moral relativism, thus defined, figures within the usual classification schemes within metaethics. We already observed that indexical moral relativists can plausibly be seen as reductivists. As such, they are also moral cognitivists (they claim that moral judgements are beliefs), and — on a standard definition — moral realists, for they claim that some moral judgements are true because of the facts and properties to which they have reduced the contents of moral judgements (cf Harman 2015). The same is not clear for invariant moral relativists, who might best be classified as non-cognitivists—at least in so far as the relevant mental states with relativised propositional contents qualify as non-cognitive states.

In addition to declared moral relativists, there are, arguably, also some “involuntary” moral relativists as defined by (MR). For example the non-cognitivist and expressivist Allan Gibbard (1990) seems to qualify—he would fall in the category of *invariant* moral relativism. One can argue that any non-cognitivist who distinguishes between correct and incorrect moral judgements, and who thinks that this correctness depends on features of the judge, is a moral relativist according to (MR). This would seem to include some versions of contemporary “hybrid expressivist theories” (see Foot 1978, Bloomfield 2003 for such arguments; for objections see Horgan and Timmons 2006).

Even Mackie’s error theory (Mackie 1977) would seem to qualify: while Mackie seems to claim that all moral judgements are false (or are perhaps in a weaker sense defective), he does want to preserve moral thought for its social benefits, and he is therefore committed to regarding some of these false or defective judgements as correct, and others as incorrect. In so far as this correctness depends on the society in question (and his argument from disagreement seems to commit him to that too), he qualifies as a moral relativist according to (MR).

Similarly, Stephen Finlay’s “end-relational” theory (2008), which is primarily billed as a reductive naturalistic view, seems to qualify—in this case as the indexical form of moral relativism.

Thus, moral relativism is a metaethical doctrine that cuts across many of the well-known classifications of metaethical views.

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