

Morality: Objective, Subjective, or Culturally Relative?

I. Reality and Subjectivity:

On many issues—whether about the quality of a particular film or about the existence of a Supreme Being—people will often say that the issue is “subjective” or is merely “a matter of opinion” and, therefore, cannot be addressed objectively. Usually these are issues that are highly contested or debated, where the disagreement doesn’t seem resolvable, and where we are therefore left feeling that there is no *true* answer or no *hard fact* to which we can appeal in order to settle the issue.

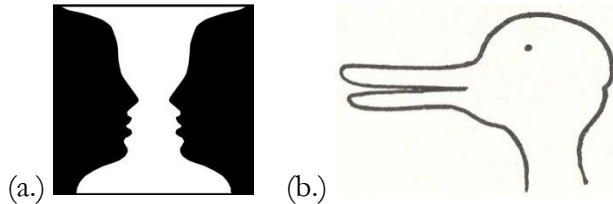
While it is tempting to dismiss something as subjective or relative to culture, could you imagine, for instance, if one claimed that whether $1 + 1 = 2$ is merely “subjective” or “a matter of opinion”? How about if one claimed that whether or not *the Earth orbits the Sun* is merely subjective or a matter of opinion? The Earth’s relation to the Sun was hotly contested at one point in history; so you could imagine someone at that time throwing up his or her arms and declaring “it’s just a matter of opinion!” But the mere presence of disagreement never means that the issue over which there is disagreement is merely a matter of opinion.

The fact is, which issues are merely *matters of opinion* and which are genuine *matters of fact* is itself a major philosophical issue. Most people are comfortable with the idea that physics and chemistry concern genuine matters of fact; and most people are comfortable with the idea that matters of beauty and taste are merely matters of opinion. But when it comes to *ethical* or *moral* issues, we should not be quick to dismiss these as merely “matters of opinion”, for moral or ethical issues are often *life and death* issues, and certainly you don’t want to say that whether or not it would be morally wrong *for someone to commit mass murder* is merely a matter of opinion! No, we feel that it would be wrong, as a hard fact.

First, we need to be clear about what it means for something to be objective or a matter of fact and what it means for something to be subjective or a matter of opinion. “Matter of fact” means a matter of *reality*, and “reality” is famously defined by the philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) as something *that is what it is, regardless of what anyone thinks about it*. In other words, something is *real* if its existence and its nature is independent of our perceptions, beliefs, desires, and attitudes about it. It does not matter whether or not we *want* the Earth to orbit the Sun, or whether or not we *believe* that the Earth orbits the Sun. The reality is just that the Earth orbits the Sun. Even if everyone in the world were to believe that the Earth *does not* orbit the Sun, then everyone’s belief would simply be *false*, as it would fail to conform to reality. Reality does not have to conform to our perceptions, beliefs, and

desires. Rather, our perceptions, beliefs, and desires have to conform to reality. Often, the facts or realities can be difficult to ascertain; but simply believing something never makes it true.

In contrast, to say that a matter or issue is “subjective” is to say that there is *no* reality determining correctness or truth of the matter. It is to say that the matter consists in *nothing but* people’s perceptions, beliefs, desires, attitudes, etc.. For instance, consider two famous illusions: (a.) the lamp and two faces illusion and (b.) the duck-rabbit illusion:



So, is (a.) an image of two faces, or is it an image of a lamp? How about (b.)? Is it a duck, or is it a rabbit?

In (a.), there is no fact or reality as to whether the image itself is of a lamp or of two faces facing each other; and in (b.), there is no fact or reality as to whether the image is of a duck or of a rabbit. There are *real* lines, shapes, and colors. But these lines, shapes, and colors are neither of lamp nor of two faces, and neither of a duck nor of a rabbit. People will simply perceive these lines and shapes as one or as the other. The matter is “subjective” or relative to individual perceivers. Similarly, whether or not chocolate ice cream tastes better than strawberry ice cream, or whether brown eyes are more attractive than green eyes, are matters to which there is *no* reality or no fact of the matter. How something tastes, or how attractive something is, simply consists in one’s perception of it.

Again, most of us are comfortable with the idea that there is no reality or that there are no fact regarding matters of beauty and matters of taste. We will agree that these matters are subjective. However, these matters often shade into others that are not so easily dismissed as subjective. For instance, consider some eating preferences. For instance, an ancient tribe of Indians (in south Asia) called the Callatians were known for eating the bodies of their deceased loved ones. They didn’t kill people for the purpose of eating their bodies; rather it was part a ritual when a loved one passed away. Supposing this practice has no significant harmful health effects, is there any fact of the matter about whether or not it is wrong to eat one’s dead loved ones? Also, consider sexual practices. Is there any fact of the matter about whether having multiple sexual partners, or having a sexual partner of the same sex, is wrong? For many people, eating one’s own deceased loved ones (who died naturally) is morally wrong; and for many people, engaging in certain sexual practices—such as promiscuous or

polyamorous sex, or homosexual sex—is morally wrong, even if there is nothing necessarily medically unsafe with such practices. Here we are confronted with the central meta-ethical question about *morality*: is morality *real*, or is it *subjective* (or “culturally relative”)?

It might be easy that there is no reality or no fact regarding the rightness and wrongness of funeral practices or of sexual practices. But when it comes to child abuse, slavery, oppression, murder, rape, torture, and genocide (the murder of a whole people), it is not as easy to say that there is no reality or fact about their wrongness. It goes against our instincts to think that whether or not child abuse is wrong is merely a subjective or culturally relative matter. However, there are some reasons for thinking that morality in general is not real, but, like beauty, consists solely in people’s beliefs, attitudes, and preferences.

II. Moral Realism and Its Problems

Moral Realism is the view that moral values and principles are *real*, in that they are whatever they are regardless of what people *believe* they are, and that moral properties such *right* and *wrong* are not in the head, but are out there in the world. Thus, the moral realist holds that there are moral facts and moral truths. So, if the moral realist believes that it is wrong to kill pigs to eat their meat, then the realist holds that it is not just wrong *to him or her*, or wrong *to his or her culture*, but that it is wrong generally—although the realist can maintain that it is not *always* wrong to kill pigs to their meat (for instance, when one is starving and has nothing else to eat).

It is important to distinguish Moral Realism from **Moral Absolutism**, which is the view that there are absolute or *exceptionless* moral rules and prohibitions, as well as **Ethical Dogmatism**, which is the view that oneself or some authority (perhaps a religious authority) cannot be incorrect about what is morally right and wrong. A moral absolutist will say that, if torture is morally wrong, then it is wrong *always, everywhere, without exception*. The moral realist, however, can hold that torture is *generally* wrong, although torture may be justified in rare circumstances, such as when torturing a person would guarantee revealing the location of a nuclear bomb and save thousands of people. All the moral realist insists upon is that are *objective facts* about whether an action (such as torturing one person to save a whole city) is morally right or wrong. Also, unlike the ethical dogmatist, the moral realist need not suppose that he or she already knows the true answers to all ethical questions. Moral realists are often *fallibilists*, accepting that the moral reality may not line up with their own moral beliefs.

As we all feel strongly about some ethical issues, most of us tend to be moral realists by nature, and we behave as if there are facts of the matter about moral right and wrong (for instance, we express outrage when an innocent person is murdered). However, moral realism faces some theoretical problems. There are some reasons to doubt that there are objective moral truths, and these reasons are pointed out by those who defend the opposing metaethical viewpoint: *moral relativism*.

One major problem with (or objection to) moral realism is that, it seems, moral facts cannot be observed, measured, or detected by empirical or experimental means. If there is an objective or real moral standard or code, we cannot confirm the existence of that standard or code through the normal methods of science—namely, through observation and measurement. We can confirm the existence of the moral codes of *particular societies or cultures*, as those codes consist simply in the shared beliefs and attitudes of their members. But we cannot, at least not through empirical or observational means, confirm the existence of a moral code that exists independently of people's beliefs and attitudes.

Moreover, it does not seem like moral qualities or moral facts are even the sort of things that can be observed or measured. We can observe colors, sizes, shapes, motions, sounds, and other physical properties, but we cannot observe or physically measure moral rightness or moral wrongness. For instance, if you see a mean old man kick a puppy, you immediately *judge* that what the man did was morally wrong; but, it seems, you do not literally *see* the wrongness of his act. Moral qualities, values, and obligations seem *abstract*, and therefore not directly observable.

Additionally, considering that most of us agree that there are no objective facts pertaining to matters of beauty and taste, it is easy to see how matters of morality may be subjective or culturally relative as well. This is especially because matters of beauty/taste and ethical matters **shade into each other** and often cannot be clearly distinguished. Consider, for instance, the case of the Callatians, who eat their deceased relatives; for many, it isn't clear whether this is simply a matter of taste or a matter of morality. Also, many people within conservative circles find homosexual behavior morally objectionable, where many others will see it simply as a matter of preference or taste. Last, consider someone who wears a shirt praising Adolph Hitler. We would consider this to be in bad taste, but many would also find it morally objectionable. So, one may argue that moral attitudes show themselves to be as much subjective or culturally relative as attitudes regarding beauty and taste.

But Moral Realism can be defended against these objections or problems. Regarding the problem of observability, a moral realist may respond that even though moral facts are abstract and not directly observable, that does not mean that they are not real. For instance, *mathematical facts* are

abstract and not observable, but they still seem real. Although one can observe that $1 + 1 = 2$ in a particular instance (1 apple + 1 apple = 2 apples), one cannot observe that $1 + 1$ *always, without exception*, equals 2. That $1 + 1$ always equals 2 is an *abstract mathematical truth* that seems knowable only by means of *reason* or by a special intellectual faculty. Similarly, moral facts may be knowable only by reason or by some special moral sense or intellectual ability.

Further, regarding the problem that ethical matters seem to lie along a continuum with matters of beauty and taste, the moral realist will argue that there is a sharp difference, depending on the moral facts. Either the Callatians eating their deceased loved ones is morally wrong, or its not and it is just a matter of taste; the same goes for sexuality and choice of clothing. The fact that matters of taste are sometimes *confused with* matters of morality does not show that, like matters of taste, matters of morality are subjective or merely relative to culture.

III. Subjectivism, Cultural Relativism, and their Problems

Moral Relativism, generally, is the opposite of moral realism. According to moral relativism, there is **no** real moral standard or code, and there are no real moral qualities or moral facts. On this general view, all moral right and wrong is relative to or dependent on what people, either individually or as a whole culture, *think* is morally right or wrong. On this viewpoint, morality is something people *create*—through their attitudes and beliefs—and do not discover.

There are two types of moral relativism. The first we call **Subjective Moral Relativism**, or just “Subjectivism”. Subjective moral relativism regards ethical matters as similar to matters of beauty and taste, in that, like beauty, moral right and wrong is seen as being entirely relative to the eye of the beholder. That is, according to subjective moral relativism, moral right and wrong is entirely relative to the beliefs, attitudes, and preferences of each individual person.

This means that each individual person fully determines what is morally right or wrong—but not *for everyone*. Each individual person determines what is right and wrong only for themselves. One person cannot determine what is right or wrong for *another* person to do, for otherwise a given person’s action could be *both* right *and* wrong since it can be judged as right by one person but wrong by another. For example, if Melinda thinks Kevin’s action was wrong, but Belinda thinks that it was right, Kevin’s action cannot be *both* right and wrong, as that is contradiction. Instead, the subjectivist holds, a person’s moral attitudes determines the rightness or wrongness only of his or her own action. So, this

means that whether or not *my* action is wrong depends only on *my* attitudes and beliefs, and whether *your* action is wrong depends only on *your* attitudes and beliefs, etc..

It doesn't take much to see what shocking conclusions subjectivism leads to. If everyone's actions are right or wrong only according to *their own* individual opinions, then that means that so long as a serial killer or a mass murderer believes that his action (the killing and murdering) was not wrong, then in fact it was *not* wrong. Furthermore, considering that people generally act in accordance with what they truly believe is right or morally permissible, it seems that hardly anyone, anywhere, will ever do anything morally wrong. According to subjective moral relativism, so long a person thinks what they are doing is right, then it is right. This makes people *morally infallible*—meaning that they can do no wrong. Moreover, if everyone is morally infallible, or morally perfect, then that also means that everyone is *morally equivalent*—that is, no one is any worse or any better than anyone else. Thus, subjectivism entails that *you* are no better than Hitler; in fact, it entails that MLK Jr. or Gandhi was no better than Hitler. For if everyone is perfect, then literally no one can be better than anyone else.

To most people, it is absurd to think that no one can do wrong, and that no one is ever any better or worse than anyone else. However, this is what subjective moral relativism entails. Thus, it is a compelling reason *not* to accept that viewpoint.

Alternatively, one might reject subjective moral relativism in favor of **Cultural Moral Relativism**, which is a more sophisticated form of moral relativism, although it faces the same general problems as subjectivism (as well some others). According to cultural moral relativism, moral right and wrong is entirely relative, not to the beliefs and attitudes of each individual person, but rather to shared beliefs and attitudes of whole *cultures* or *societies*.

Specifically, cultural moral relativism consists in the following three distinct claims:

- a. Different societies and cultures tend to have at least slightly different moral codes. In other words, each culture or society involves set of moral attitudes and beliefs shared among at least most of its members, where these sets of moral attitudes and beliefs vary (if only slightly) from culture to culture.
- b. There is no *universal* moral code; that is, there is no moral code *other than* the moral codes of particular societies/cultures. Therefore, there is no universal standard by which the moral code of one culture can be worse or better than the moral code of another culture.

- c. An individual is bound only by the moral code of his or her *own* culture. That is, the actions of individual members are right or wrong only according to the moral code of the culture to which he or she belongs.

Thus, like subjectivism, cultural moral relativism denies that there is any real or objective moral code or standard. But *unlike* subjectivism, cultural moral relativism holds that the actions of each individual person *can* be morally wrong—however, they can be wrong *only relative to* the moral code of his or her culture or society.

For instance, the killing of whales and dolphins for food has been common among some subcultures in Japan. The cultural moral relativist would say that a Japanese person killing a dolphin for food is not doing anything morally wrong. However, an American killing a dolphin for food would be doing something morally wrong, because Americans generally condemn the killing of dolphins for culinary purposes. Further, female genital mutilation (FGM), which can involve the removal of the clitoris, has been common in Africa and in some parts of the Muslim world. But in Europe and in the Americas, such a practice is not tolerated. Thus, the cultural moral relativist would say that forcing FGM upon a certain African woman is not wrong, while forcing it upon a European or a North/South American woman would be morally wrong.

Now, we should always be open-minded about differences between one's own way of life and the ways of life of people from other parts of the world. Indeed, we should be respectful of people wearing different clothing, celebrating different holidays, and speaking different languages. Diversity is something to celebrate. Also, often there are justifications for a cultural practice that others would deem wrong. For instance, Inuit people (northern Canada and Alaska) have practiced abandoning their elderly to die when the elderly person can no longer contribute. But they have some justification for it. Their life is a daily struggle, and they cannot risk having more mouths to feed than members who can contribute.

However, a line must be drawn somewhere, and one should never confuse moral criticism with intolerance or bigotry. Indeed, if we cannot criticize other cultures on the grounds that morality is relative to culture, then we cannot criticize even our own culture or society.

If Cultural moral relativism is true, then all cultures and societies are morally **infallible**, since so long as a culture accepts a certain practice, they cannot be wrong in engaging in that practice, whether it is FGM, the persecution of homosexuals, or even slavery. Not even one's *own* culture can be wrong, which means that one cannot rationally criticize one's own culture. Moreover, if all cultures

or societies are morally infallible, then they are all morally **equivalent**—no culture or society is any better or any worse than any other. So, a peaceful and fully egalitarian society would be no better than a warring, slave-owning, and women-oppressing society. Note, also, that since all cultures and societies are morally equivalent, there can be **no moral progress** within a culture or society over time. The reason is that a society can make moral progress between time A to time B only if that society at time B is *morally better than* that society at time A. But cultural relativism maintains that no society can be better or worse than another. Thus, if cultural moral relativism is correct, then, contrary to what we normally think, the abolition of slavery in the U.S. was not an instance where that society made a change for *the better*.

So the problems that arise for subjective moral relativism also seem to arise for cultural moral relativism, only at the level of whole cultures or societies rather than at the level of individuals. But there are many other theoretical problems for cultural moral relativism, which thus make it seem even more problematic.

First, what exactly determines membership to a culture? That is, what is it that makes you a member of a certain culture. Is it where you were born? Where you currently live? How you were raised? Or is it a personal choice? Notice that if your belonging to a certain culture is a personal choice, then cultural moral relativism collapses into subjectivism, for then you can choose which moral code you wish to follow. Second, what exactly determines the moral code of a culture? Is it determined just by the ruling class? Or is it determined by the majority of people in that culture? Can it be a simple majority (51%) or must it be a vast majority of those people (95%)? Finally what happens if you can be reasonably said to belong to two or more cultures, and the moral codes of those culture *conflict*. For instance, what if you're a woman raised in a household in whose original culture daughters are forbidden from marrying anyone other than who their fathers choose, but you were also raised in a wider culture that encourages women to marry who they themselves choose?

Conclusion:

Overall, moral relativism (whether subjective or cultural) does not seem to fare any better under critical scrutiny than moral realism does. The debate between realism and relativism is on-going, and it delves into far more complexities than were covered here. However, for our purposes, we will assume that moral realism is true, and that there is a real and universal standard or code of morality. Assuming moral realism, the next question is: what does the moral code *say*?—that is, ***what are the fundamental principles of morality?***

Questions (worth 7 points total). Answer each question carefully based on the reading. Write clearly, grammatically, and in full sentences.

1. What does it mean for something to be real? What does it mean for something to be subjective? Give and explain an example of something (relating neither to beauty, taste, nor illusions) that is subjective or *not* real?
2. In mostly your own words, explain what is moral realism is, and how it is different from moral absolutism and ethical dogmatism? (“mostly in your own words” means “do not simply copy from the text” but paraphrase).
3. Explain the two objections to moral realism presented in the reading.
4. What is moral relativism? Explain the two different types of moral relativism, and how one is different from the other.
5. What problematic conclusions does subjective moral relativism entail, and why?
6. Explain one example (not in the reading) of two cultures that have different moral beliefs about a particular practice. Do not simply give a cultural stereotype (ex: “chinese people eat dogs”) but do research online. What does the cultural moral relativist say about these differences?
7. In mostly your own words, explain why cultural moral relativism entails that there can be no moral progress with a society or culture over time.