

Relativism—Descriptive and Normative

-- A “moral code” consists in the beliefs (whether true or false, reasonable or unreasonable, humane or barbaric) about right/wrong, good/bad, just/unjust, virtuous/vicious that are *actually* held by the majority of people in a culture, tribe, social group, or society.

Different cultures/social groups have had different moral codes. E.g. the moral code of ancient Egypt deemed incest among royalty to be okay, whereas our (contemporary America’s) moral code forbids it.

-- Don’t confuse a moral code with the “objectively true” morality (assuming there is such a thing). Pat Robertson thinks that the true morality is Biblical, and using it, he would judge the moral code of contemporary America to be immoral, because most Americans seem to believe that sex between single, consenting men and women who are in love with each other is just fine, whereas Robertson condemns it as sinful—“fornication.” Certainly there have been many people in history who rejected the moral code of their own society as mistaken or immoral, either completely or in some parts.

-- Using this notion of a “moral code,” we can now distinguish **descriptive** relativism from **ethical** (“normative”) relativism.

Descriptive relativism—This is the view that *different cultures have different moral codes*. The moral codes of traditional Eskimos, of feudal Japanese, of modern Western Europeans, of ancient Greeks, of New Guinea headhunters, etc. differ in some fairly significant ways. The ancient Greeks thought infanticide was permissible, we don’t. 18th century Hindu villagers in India supported the practice of *suttee*, while we condemn it. And so on.

Descriptive relativism is a theory in anthropology, not ethics. It is not a theory in ethics because it is not an evaluative or normative view. It does not say, nor does it imply, anything about how anyone *ought* to behave.

Ethical (or normative) relativism says three things:

1. Each of us *ought* to follow the moral code of his/her own society/culture. To act immorally = to violate the moral code of one’s society/culture. (This means that if I judge someone from *another* culture by *my* culture’s code, my moral judgment could very well be *false*).

2. The moral code of any culture/society is no better or worse, no more true or false, than the moral code of any other culture/society. There are no “objectively true,” universally valid moral principles that would allow us to rank the moral codes of different cultures against each other and say that some are more enlightened, humane, etc. than others. And because no such principles exist, it makes no sense to talk about “moral progress” within a single culture or civilization over time.

3. Everyone has a moral duty to “tolerate” the moral codes of other cultures/societies. This means not only that we should not try to force our moral beliefs on others (instead, we should practice “noninterventionism”), but that we shouldn’t *judge* the members of other cultures/societies by our code. If we do either of these, then we are doing something *wrong*. We are being *ethnocentric*.

-- *Descriptive* relativism makes an "is" claim of anthropology, while *ethical* relativism makes an "ought" or "value" judgment in ethics.

-- A popular argument for ethical relativism is as follows:

1. Different cultures have different moral beliefs; for example, some cultures hold that infanticide is permissible, while others hold that it is wrong.. (Descriptive relativism).
2. Therefore, there are no objectively binding, universally valid moral rules. Right and wrong are relative to one's culture. (Ethical relativism).

-- This argument commits the same fallacy as the argument for moral subjectivism that's based on the premise that individuals disagree about what's right and wrong. The fact that individuals or whole societies disagree about how to answer some question does not all by itself prove that the question has no single, correct answer.

Some objections to ethical relativism:

1. It implies that there is no "objective" right or wrong not only as regards dietary and social matters that clearly are conventional (should we use forks or chopsticks? Should we show gratitude to the host by belching out loud or thanking him for the excellent dinner? etc.), but also as regards such practices as slavery, genocide, *suttee*, female genital mutilation, etc.

2. It implies that anyone who rejects his society's moral code, including anyone who judges it backward and tries to reform it, is an immoral person. This is conservatism with a vengeance. It's hard to believe that a Hindu woman whose husband has just died, but who resists being thrown into the funeral pyre with him, is an immoral person. Or that the slave in the ante-bellum South who tries to escape is an immoral person. Or that Jesus was immoral.

3. It is inconsistent. It denies that there are any "objective," universally binding moral principles, then it claims that all cultures must observe a duty of "toleration."

4. It misunderstands what the duty of "toleration" does and does not require. There are limits to what we have a duty to tolerate. We have a duty to tolerate those with a different religion, but not a duty to tolerate slavery, murder, child molestation, or other activities in which one person is violating the rights of others. We have a duty to condemn and in some circumstances to intervene and try to prevent rights violations.

How *Not* to Argue for Toleration

A) The moral code of any society/culture is just as valid as the moral code of any other society/culture. (Ethical Relativism).

B) Every society/culture has a duty to tolerate the moral code of other societies/cultures. (Principle of Cultural Tolerance)

B) might very well be true, but the above is a bad argument for it. Even if A) is true, it provides no support or good reason for believing B). In fact, far from supporting B), A) actually seems to contradict it. Why?

Some societies/cultures have a moral code which claims that people in other societies/cultures are “barbarians” or “savages” who should be conquered. The moral codes of these societies reject tolerance and support intolerance. It is because these societies exist that one cannot consistently accept both A) and B).

If one thinks that B) is true, then one has to say that societies with a moral code that agrees with B) are more valid than societies with a moral code that rejects B) (i.e. the ones that have a moral code that approves of conquering the “savages”). But if one says that, one must (if one is to remain consistent) reject A).

A very similar bad argument is the following one:

C) The moral opinions of any one person are just as valid as the moral opinions of any other person. (Moral Subjectivism).

D) Everyone has a moral duty to tolerate the moral opinions of others. (Principle of Individual Tolerance).

If you really believe that C), moral subjectivism, is true, then what you have to believe is that:

E) The moral opinion that says that everyone ought to tolerate others’ moral opinions is no more valid than the moral opinion that it’s okay to persecute the people whom one disagrees with.

There’s no way to derive the principle of individual tolerance from moral subjectivism.