

## Lecture Notes 7 : Moral Relativism

Lecturer: Nicholas Vrousalis

nv211@cam.ac.uk

Relativism, in general, is a form of *naturalized epistemology* (like Ayer's rabid empiricism).

The general form of relativist claims is:

- (1)  $x$  is relative to framework  $F$ , where  $x$  can be truth, reality, practice, etc. and  $F$  language, culture, history, etc.

The most general form of relativism:

Global relativism about truth ( $G$ ): sentences, propositional attitudes, etc. are only true relative to some framework  $F$ , and their truth does not transcend  $F$ . There are no objective,  $F$ -transcending, truths.

$G$  can't be anything but false. (cf. Socrates' argument against Protagoras in the *Thaetetus*.)

Moral relativism is a form of *local* relativism.

Moral relativism ( $M$ ): moral statements are only true relative to some  $F$ , and their truth does not transcend  $F$ . There are no objective,  $F$ -transcending moral claims.

A well-known argument for  $M$  begins from a form of scepticism about moral reasons.

## Reasons internalism

Internalists claim that:

- (2) If  $S$  is a (set of) consideration(s) that constitutes a reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ , then  $S$  must flow from  $A$ 's motivational set.

According to the internalist, a Nazi has no reason not to murder, for not doing any of this is not part of the Nazi's motivational set. Internalists need a further premise:

- (3) All normative reasons are internal reasons.

Thus if  $A$ 's motivational set lacks anti-torture sensibilities, and we can't get  $A$  to attain these sensibilities, then:

- (4)  $A$  has no normative reason not to torture babies.

And we have the apparent relativist conclusion. But why *assume* that there can be no *categorical*, i.e. motivation-independent, reasons for people not to spend their lives counting blades of grass, discounting pain on Tuesdays, or torturing others?

## Relativism as subjectivism

Subjectivists about morals say that claims like:

(5) Murder is wrong.

are equivalent to:

(6) *F* disapproves of murder.

## The argument from moral disagreement

Consider:

(7) Apples are round, and (8) Apples are not round.

These two statements are contradictory, and so are:

(9) Murder is wrong, and (10) Murder is not wrong.

In relativist language, (9) and (10) translate as:

(11) People disapprove of murder in  $F_1$ , and (12) People do not disapprove of murder in  $F_2$ .

The translation of (9) and (10) removes the challenge of incoherence by making moral disagreement impossible. For:

(13) Genuine moral disagreement involves making assertions about the same things, i.e. involves expressing the same propositions.

(14) (9) and (10) do not express the same propositions as (11) and (12)

∴ (15) Relativism cannot make sense of moral disagreement.

## Is relativism conducive to toleration?

The answer is 'no'. Here's why:

(16) There is a moral imperative to tolerate difference.

But *M* implies that:

(17) No moral imperatives are universal.

∴ (18) The moral imperative to tolerate is not universal.

At best, relativism does not support universal toleration. At worst, it is compatible with nasty forms of intolerance.

## Further Reading

Fisher, A. *Metaethics*, ch. 7.

Gowans, C. (2004), 'Moral Relativism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.