

Ethical (Moral, Cultural) Relativism

Ethics

Deals with problems of moral (ethical) judgment.

What is moral judgment?—Evaluation of persons and their actions. Such evaluation uses the following key concepts or moral terms:

- Good—Evil
- Right—Wrong
- Obligatory—Permissible—Forbidden

Main Questions:

- What is the *meaning* of moral terms, such as above? What is the structure of these concepts? What are the connections between them?

Some of them are often taken to be primitive, basic, fundamental, others derivative; e.g., the notion of obligatory can be taken as a primitive.

- Truth value of moral judgments? How do we know whether moral judgments are true or false? Which criteria do we employ to find it out? What are the objective moral facts? How do we *justify* moral judgments?

These two questions are obviously connected (both ways). They comprise the *analytic* part of Ethics (Ethical Analysis, Ethical Theory)

Ethical Theory vs. Applied (Normative) Ethics

Applied Ethics focuses on particular moral problems. What is the right way of resolving them? Is abortion right? Should it be allowed? Etc. We try to give solutions to normative problems that actually arise.

One cannot do normative ethics without first handling analytic part of ethics. In normative ethics, one simply applies ethical theory to particular moral problems.

Ethical Theory

- Are moral judgments true or false and, if true, how do we find out what they are?
- Are there any *moral facts of the matter*, and if yes, how can we discover them?
- What *criteria* do we apply to determine the truth value of moral statements?
- How do we *justify* our moral judgments?

Ethical (Cultural) Relativism

- Moral judgments have truth value, but it is always relative to a culture
- There are no moral absolutes.
- All moral utterances depend on where one lives.
- Different societies have different moral standards.

CR is based on the empirical sciences: anthropology and sociology.

- As we move from society to society we find radical difference in basic moral principles.
- We conclude that morality is a matter of cultural acceptance or appraisal. Morality is relative to a culture, always.

(Against cultural imperialism, etc. Tolerance.)

The main argument in support of Cultural Relativism has the following form: We begin with what might be called:

Diversity Thesis: What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society.

and infer that there are no objective moral norms or principles.

Mere fact of disagreement among various peoples No objective truth in the matter

Example:

1. The Eskimos see nothing wrong with infanticide, whereas Americans believe infanticide is immoral.
2. Therefore, infanticide is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

This reasoning is surely invalid, as it stands. To make it valid, one has to supply a further premise, which might be called

Dependency Thesis: All moral principles derive their validity from cultural acceptance.

Is Dependency Thesis true? Criticisms of DT:

- Is cultural disagreement really about the basic moral principles?
- The problem of tolerance.
- The problem of moral disagreement.
- “Reformists are always wrong.” One cannot meaningfully or intelligibly raise questions about the customs and traditions of one's own society. For they just *define* morality for us. Raising such questions would be similar to asking if a triangle is really three-sided?
- The difficulty of defining the boundaries of “culture” or “society.”