

MORAL RELATIVISM

I. Forms of Ethical Relativism/Absolutism: Some Definitions:

- A. Descriptive Ethical Relativism (DER):** an anthropological/psychological/sociological theory holding that the moral beliefs/attitudes of one person/society/culture are, even at the most fundamental level, different from those of other persons/societies/cultures in such a way that there are no moral beliefs/attitudes that are invariant between persons/societies/cultures. DER makes no claims about the correctness or incorrectness of moral beliefs/attitudes.
- B. Descriptive Ethical Absolutism (DEA):** an anthropological/psychological/sociological theory holding that, at least at the most fundamental level, there are some (i.e., at least one) moral beliefs/attitudes that are invariant between persons/societies/cultures.
- C. Normative Ethical Relativism (NER):** a normative (prescriptive) ethical theory according to which the rightness/wrongness of an action depends fundamentally on the moral beliefs/attitudes of the agent or the practices/conventions of the society/culture to which the agent belongs. NER denies that there are any universally applicable moral standards, independent of the moral beliefs/attitudes of the agents and the moral practices/conventions of cultures or societies.
- D. Normative Ethical Absolutism (NEA):** a normative ethical theory according to which there are some (at least one) universally applicable moral standards, independent of the beliefs/attitudes of the agent and the practices/conventions of cultures or societies.

II. Philosophical Questions about Ethical Relativism/Absolutism

- A.** Do the facts that have been established by social/psychological scientists about variation in social customs and attitudes and about interpersonal normative disagreement entail (or provide evidence for) the truth of DER?
- B.** Would the truth of DER entail (or provide evidence for) the truth of NER?
- C.** What are the implications of the truth of NER?

III. Evaluating the Evidence for DER

- A. The Evidence:** There is a great deal of evidence indicating that cultural and individual attitudes concerning proper behavior differ quite strikingly. Attitudes about lying, cheating, helping others in need, as well as conceptions of fair-play and what we owe others, differ quite dramatically from culture to culture and even from person to person. Many have taken these facts about variations in practices and attitudes to entail (or provide good evidence for) the truth of DER. Call this ‘the argument from (cultural/individual) variation’.
- B. The Nature of the Argument:** The argument is an “inference to the best explanation”. That is, the truth of DER is asserted on the grounds that it is the best explanation for the observed variations in practices and attitudes about proper behavior.

C. Criticism of the Argument: The plausibility of an inference to the best explanation depends on the plausibility that the explanation inferred is really a better explanation than alternative explanations. In order for the argument from variation to be plausible, it must give us good reasons to reject the following hypotheses that could explain the facts of variation in practices and attitudes in a way that is consistent with DEA.

1. **Circumstantial Variation:** Different cultural practices (customs, institutions, *etc.*) and superficial moral attitudes may reflect not different fundamental moral beliefs/attitudes but the *same* beliefs/attitudes responding to different circumstances. So, the tribe that expects its aged members to “walk off to their death in the wilderness” may aim at the overall good of the group no less than a culture that, living in more abundant circumstances, finds this practice abhorrent.
2. **Perceived Circumstantial Variation:** Different cultural practices (customs, institutions, *etc.*) and superficial moral attitudes may result from different empirical beliefs about the situation. So, for example, a tribe in which individuals are expected to kill their parents before the parents get infirm may not differ from us in any fundamental moral belief or attitude. If they believe that one will live for eternity in an after-life in the same physical condition they are in just prior to their death, and that it is both cruel and disrespectful to condemn one’s parents to an eternity of infirmity, they share our fundamental moral beliefs and disagree with us about the situation we confront.

IV. From DER to NER

- A. It is often simply assumed that descriptive ethical relativism entails normative ethical relativism. Sometimes this results from a simple confusion over an ambiguity in the claim that there is no universal moral standard. This can be interpreted as an assertion of the truth of either descriptive relativism or normative relativism depending on whether it means that there is no universally *applied* moral standard or no universally *applicable* moral standard. The first interpretation does not imply the second.
- B. It is not true in general that the fact that people have different beliefs about a subject entails that there is no fact of the matter independent of these beliefs. For example, people have different beliefs about the causes of disease (some accepting a germ theory and others a “demonic spirits” theory). We hardly think that this implies that there is no fact of the matter independent of people’s beliefs. Even in our own society, people disagree about whether astrology offers a reliable guide to the future, but this disagreement is no reason for thinking that the truth of the matter is whatever one believes to be true. The defender of the inference from DER to NER must explain why individuals or cultures *cannot* be wrong about their moral beliefs—why it is that in the realm of morality, but not other realms, what is right is whatever the individual or culture believes to be right. And this must be done in a way that doesn’t beg the question. It will not do merely to claim that moral judgments are different than these other sorts of judgments.

V. The Implications of NER

- A. **The impossibility of intercultural comparisons:** Because NER holds that there are no moral standards that are applicable across cultures, it appears to be impossible to engage in cross-cultural moral comparisons. This seems to be true of any form of NER,

but, to illustrate, consider a form that holds that actions are morally wrong if and only if they are condemned by the prevailing attitudes in the society of which the actor is a member. It follows, then, that Society A's practice of selling minor female children into marriages that amount to little more than slavery is morally equal to Society B's practice of nurturing and caring for young children if the prevailing attitudes in each society approve of the practice in question.

- B. The impossibility of moral progress:** Because the notion of moral progress requires cross-cultural comparisons (where the cultures are separated by time rather than space or in some other way), to the extent that NER renders cross-cultural comparisons impossible, it will render the notion of moral progress unintelligible.
- C. The degeneration of cultural relativism into individual relativism:** Because a culture is defined in part by its shared attitudes, NER may render even interpersonal moral comparisons unintelligible. This is because when our moral criticism of others with whom we live and interact reveals that we have fundamentally different moral attitudes, what this shows is that we belong to different (sub)cultures. But, if cross-cultural moral comparisons and criticisms are impossible, then we cannot engage in such comparisons and criticisms of anyone who has fundamentally different moral attitudes.
- D. Relativism and Tolerance:** Perhaps the primary motivation most non-philosophers have for accepting relativism is based on a perceived connection between relativism and tolerance. (Some philosophers are relativists, but I know of none that offer this as a reason.) There is, indeed, a connection between relativism and tolerance—but it is not at all the one that relativists think is there.
- 1. The putative connection:** Those whose motivation for accepting NER is based on advocacy of tolerance seem to think that NEA either is necessarily committed to intolerance or provides a basis for intolerance that NER does not. This is because NEA, in holding that there are moral standards that apply cross-culturally, allows us to condemn other societies and to hold that ours is objectively morally superior. They believe that denying any such moral standards, makes it impossible to condemn other cultures, destroying and, so, forces a sort of tolerance.
 - 2. The confusion:** In fact, NER is a particularly bad basis for moral tolerance. This is because according to the relativist there are *no* universally applicable moral standards. Every society's practices have to be judged by that society's attitudes. If a given society has no aversion to intolerance toward the practices of others, then the relativist cannot claim that there is anything (objectively) wrong with their intolerance. On the other hand, if there *are* universally applicable moral standards (as the absolutist claims) then one of them might be that people be tolerant of the practices of others. (It is interesting to note in this regard that what is perhaps the most powerful defense of moral toleration in the English language, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, is based on an absolutist moral theory, utilitarianism. In contrast, Patrick Devlin's *The Enforcement of Morality*, which argues for legal sanctions against prostitution and homosexuality, is based on a version of moral relativism. Devlin feels no need to defend the claim that prostitution and homosexuality are objectively wrong. He believes that morality is just a matter of shared, strongly held attitudes, and, so, the fact that our culture strongly opposes these actions *just is* a moral condemnation of them.)

3. **Avoiding the confusion:** To avoid the confusion one must be very clear about at least the two following distinctions.
 - a. **The moral evaluation of an action and the moral evaluation of interference with that action:** It is quite possible for an action to be morally wrong but for it to also be wrong to interfere with others' performance of that action. Perhaps, it might even be wrong to public condemn an action that it is wrong to perform.
 - b. **The moral evaluation of an action and the moral evaluation of the agent who performs it:** Even good people do bad things often because they have false beliefs, don't understand the nature or consequences of their actions, or don't have the intellectual character that allows them to abstract from current practices and reflect on them. Because of this, it may well be incorrect to judge a person as morally deficient even if he performs an action that is morally atrocious.