

Cultural Relativism and the Realistic Approach to Moral Values

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Abstract - The main mission of world religion such as Christianity and Islam comes in terms of morality. A significant meta-ethical question regarding morality is related to the question of subjectivity or objectivity of moral values. Although, traditionally the ethical objectivity was a dominant view but since the modern era the view of ethical subjectivity and relativism has been increased. The main reason, one of it, given for this view refers to the diversity of culture. The aim of this paper is to deal with the moral realistic approach in the presence of cultural diversity. The writer argues to demonstrate that the cultural diversity could not and should not be a serious challenge for the moral uniformity, therefore, one is justified to keep and hold the view of moral realism in the presence of cultural differences.

Keywords - relativism, realism, value, morality

INTRODUCTION

According to world religion such as Christianity and Islam, the universe is God's creation. He is the Sovereign and Sustainer of the universe. He is All Wise, All-Powerful, Omniscient. Man is the creation of Allah and the main purpose of human life both in Holy Bible and Holy Qur'aan is presented in term of fulfilling moral aim. For instances in Holy Bible we read that the ethical life is the ultimate purpose of human life.(Bible, Matthew,16-30). The natures of Ten Commandments (Bible, exodus, 20:1-17) enjoy the ethical character. In Holy Qur'aan as well we read that the basic mission of divine prophets comes in term of moral changes.(chapter Jomah,2). Over the course of time, God sent prophets to mankind to guide and instruct them in these matters. Man is given a choice as to whether or not he wishes to follow the message of the prophets and adhere to their teachings, yet whichever path he chooses he will be held accountable for it and any consequent actions based upon it. Hence, man's time on this earth may be perceived as an opportunity to prepare himself, as best he is able, for the life hereafter.

Everyone is responsible for his own actions and no one be made to bear the burdens of another. Judgment Day provides incentive for all believers to act in accordance with the teachings of all prophets presented in religion such as Christianity and Islam, in the hope that they may achieve salvation. Religions provide man with a stable and balanced set of values and norms for all morally-based activities. The aim in this paper is to deal with the question regarding the moral values and norms. Are moral values real values , as considered so in world religion and what kind of understanding could be given for upholding of the realistic approach of moral values in presence of cultural diversity? The writer will contend for the view that cultural diversity is not necessarily a treat for the uniformity of moral standards. Of course a review on research conducted by scholars display that this view is adhered by many thinkers. (, 1970, p.577)

Moral Realism

Some thinkers argue for the view that certain empirical claims are grounds for moral skepticism. One such claim on the basis of which

some thinkers argue against moral realism is cultural relativism. (snare,1984,p.215) Moral realism is the doctrine that moral judgments, when correct, refer to something that is objective, independent of our opinions, that exists, in some sense, external to human thought. Moral realists believe that moral facts support many of our moral judgments. When we claim that to abuse a child, sexually or physically, is morally wrong is this merely our opinion, a socially supported opinion, or a report on some objective property, namely the *fact* that it is wrong to be abusive? According to moral realist such moral statements do not display merely our desire or opinion rather they display the real fact and describe it. Against moral realism there is the view of moral relativism according to which morality is relative and different moral truths hold for different people. It denies the existence of moral absolutes, of objective moral truths that hold for all people in all places at all times.

According to moral relativism, it makes no sense to ask the abstract question whether a given act is good or bad. According to moral relativism, there is no goodness or badness in the abstract; there is only goodness or badness within a specified context. An act may thus be good for one person but bad for another, or good in one culture. If moral relativism is true, then we should not ask whether an act is good or bad in the abstract, but only whether it is good or bad in a particular situation.¹

Moral Relativism has become an increasingly popular view in the latter part of this century. There are possible reasons for this among which the cultural diversity is the main concern of this research. Most of us are aware that the world contains many different cultures and that some of those cultures engage in practices very different from our own. Some people, notably the anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887-1948), have argued that given all this diversity, we should conclude that there is no single objective morality and that morality varies with culture. Perhaps the most common complaint against moral realism

¹There is another word that is related to the term moral realism. Objectivism denotes the thesis that morality is objective. Subjectivism holds that morality is subjective. The view that what is morally right or wrong depends on what someone thinks. We can think of this position as coming in two flavors: a) Subjectivism: What is morally right or wrong for you depends on what you think is morally right or wrong, i.e., right or wrong is *relative* to the individual. The 'moral facts' may alter from person to person. b) Conventionalism: What is morally right or wrong depends on what the society we are dealing with thinks, i.e., morality depends on the conventions of the society we are concerned with. The 'moral facts' may alter from society to society.

is the charge that if it were true there would be less diversity of moral practices and beliefs. There is widespread variation of moral standards within societies. Therefore moral realism is false.² (Bendict, 1934, Mackie, 1977) In the next section, I will put forward critical analysis of cultural diversity and its role and impact against the uniformity of moral standards among societies in the next section.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism as a philosophical doctrine makes the claim that proper moral standards are relative to a culture. Taken a short step further, it informs us that all proper standards are derived from culture. We are not, individually, the keepers of our own standards; cultural relativism denies that sort of subjectivity. We are obligated to use the standards of our culture, and although these standards are relative to a culture, they are objective because they are a matter of fact. The opinions of cultural anthropologists vary with respect to the problem of whether we can discover some uniformity in human nature which could be reflected in universally accepted moral standards. Some thinkers maintain that the actual range of the differences anthropology has discovered is enormous. They point out that the same kind of act is praised in one culture and blamed in another. It seems that there are varieties of moral judgment so different from one another as to force the conclusion that there is no common human nature but only a multitude of human natures. (Redfield,1962,p.440)

Cultural relativism gains support from the fact that so many people around the world have different moral standards. Three claims can be made about these differences, each attempting to support the legitimacy of cultural relativism as a philosophical doctrine: i) If correct standards, like those in ethics, are independent of culture, one would think that after millions of years of human existence we would find more agreement among people around the world, the sort

²The are other reasons for the increase of moral relativism: the decline of religion: Religion seems to offer the possibility that morality was independent of us. With a turning away from religion there seems to have come a certain amount of doubt about the possibility of objective morality. As Dostoevsky wrote: "If God doesn't exist, everything is permissible"..(Kai Nielsen,God and the Good: Dose Morality Need Religion?.. Mackie gives another reason called as The argument from Queerness. Queerness is their term Mackie employs in his case for the metaphysical peculiarity of the supposed objective values.(Mackie, 1977,p.49). For details refer to Charles Taliaferro, Contemporary philosophy of religion, p.194.

of agreement we find, for example, in science. ii) In ethics, objective “truth” is contentious; no single theory in Western tradition has convinced philosophers about the correct nature of objective moral evidence independent of cultural commitment.

In some fields, like science, most people agree that factual observation plays a key role. In ethics we find little agreement about values and about the basis for values. We do know that people are committed to the values of their cultures, and we have little reason to believe that any more objective basis actually exists. In this way, moral standards are much like the standards of behavior therefore are considered as tradition. iii) Those who study the values of people in other countries often find that those other value commitments make sense given their different circumstances, attitudes, and beliefs. It is only when judged in relation to foreign values and beliefs that the standards of others look strange. There is, in short, no good reason to reject the values of other people; the basis for rejection is typically merely another set of cultural values, which itself can claim no objectivity other than its cultural base.

For these three reasons -- the lack of agreement about moral values, the absence of a clear standard for objective truth in ethics, and the invalidity of cultural chauvinism-- cultural relativism should stand as a serious doctrine in moral theory. Think of those occasions where people you associate with violate basic cultural standards. These violations may involve personal improper standards of behavior in a group, say in a classroom, or failure to pay proper respect to friends or relatives. We believe that many standards involved in these areas are culturally relative and not based on values independent of cultural life. When a person violates basic cultural standards everyone becomes uncomfortable; we don't know what to expect from such people, and we often judge them as immoral. At those moments, when basic cultural standards are violated, we come to place increased value on them.

Critique of Cultural Relativism

Philosophers often argue that the existence of cultural differences does not prove that cultural relativism is a correct doctrine. Against cultural relativism there is another opinion represented in the works of anthropologists. They argue that people are in fact the

same everywhere. This group of philosophers claims that cultural differences have been exaggerated; groups do have different values, but these differences might stem from conflicting factual beliefs or from differing circumstances. For example, a group facing economic hardship might believe that the humane treatment requires infanticide; or religious beliefs, thought to be factual, and might dictate the way the dead are treated.

Different groups may equally value respect for human life, but they may apply that value under different circumstances, so that factual and not value differences produce apparently conflicting judgments. In other words, in the course of controversy, in supporting or denying the universal existence of certain moral phenomena, the disagreeing thinkers are often discussing what the same phenomena are not exactly. For instances, "birth and death, love and sorrow and fear are the lot of all men, all are capable of desires and dreams, and use symbolic thinking..."(Edel,1959,p.30).

All people feel shames or guilt or , probably, some combination of these,all take satisfaction in or feel dissatisfaction with regard to their enterprises and productions, all dislike, under some conditions, public humiliation and enjoy recognized success, and so on(op. cit, 450). They seem to aim at claiming that there exists some range of psychic dispositions common to all people which could be recognized as a component of human nature.

Besides the common disposition that mentioned in above quoted sentences, some common basic facts are confessed as well. Common needs, common social tasks, common framework for the wide variety of human behaviors that different cultures have developed. This group of thinkers believes that morality is universal in the formal sense that everywhere we find rules of conduct prescribing what is to be done or not to be done. Behind this similarity of form there is considerable diversity of content.(Ginsberg, 1962, p.485). This sort of explanation attempts to question the thesis according to which the widespread diversity of moral standards is true. Some moral realists contend that there is more agreement and fewer differences among cultures. It is argued that while an initial review of anthropological and sociological data may lead one to believe that there radically different views of moral standards across cultures, these differences should not

overshadow the considerable consensus between communities and cultures. (Taliaferro, 1998, p.194). "...what is recognized as a virtue in one society or religious tradition is very likely to be recognized as a virtue in the others, certainly, the set of virtues praised in one major tradition never make up a substantial part of the set of vices of another major tradition...." (Singer, 1991, p.553).³This analysis seems correct. Given divergence in circumstance and belief, a similar moral principle might produce different conclusions. How we attempt to avoid harm depends on the circumstances we face. Differing beliefs and differing circumstances might take away much of the strength of the first reason in favor of cultural relativism, but even if exaggerated, it still remains the case that significant differences in value commitment exist. For example, even when faced with hardship, people in many cultures would typically refuse to kill a newborn infant. Another example is as follow: everywhere people condemn homicide committed upon a mature healthy member of one's own group, who has not committed any crime and whose death is not treated as a means of gaining some benefit for the group. These are possible cultural universals among societies. One more example could be given. "We do not know of societies in which bravery is looked down and cowardice is praised and honor or societies in which generosity is considered a vice and ingratitude a virtue". (Brandt, 1961, p.483).

By the appeal to the above mentioned explanation and examples, now the defense of ethical uniformity between cultures may be reinforced and the initial cultural diversity could not be considered as a challenge for it. Now it is easy to present how while acknowledging some kinds of differences between cultures, the uniformity of moral standards are not denied: i) the differences of form and methods of performance not principle, ii) the differences of behavior resulting from dispositions that are treated as identical and iii) the differences in the hierarchy of accepted standards.

i) The first kind of differences that are not harmful to the ethical uniformity of cultures is differences of means that are considered as selected with regards to the same end. According to this view the supposed moral variances are based on differences of opinion

³ Moral realists such as Ralph Linton have argued in detail for the common moral standards among cultures.(Linton,1954,p.145)

regarding matters of fact and these sorts of diversity is not diversity of end or principles. For instance, respecting to parents is an ethical value and moral end in all cultures but during the exercise of such end the diversity of means and form of performance is expected due to the differences of circumstances.

Cultures seem to be different regarding this moral principle but deep consideration into the means of performance in different societies displays that they are unified and have common moral standard as to how to behave with parents. "It is not true that only ends are the object of valuations and that means are valued only as instrumental to ends. In any human valuation means have, in addition to their instrumental value, independent values as well." (Myrdal, 1958, p.49). A disagreement over the ethics of famine relief may rest upon competing assessments of whether such relief will be successful in overturning famine in the long run. This kind of moral divergence rests upon matters that one may call non-moral facts in the sense that they can be described without any direct appeal to moral terminology.

ii) Second sort of difference occurs between cultures that is not inconsistent with realistic approach of moral standards is the differences of behavior not dispositions. According to some thinkers even the strangest customs are only various costumes expressing the same dispositions, which are common to all people. (Redfield, 1962, p.440). Everywhere people are capable of love and hatred, pride and shame, joy and sorrow. Namely, people in all places and times love somebody and hate somebody. They are happy about something and unhappy about something and are proud of one thing and ashamed of another. This gives the reason why some thinkers adhere of basic moral uniformity among cultures

iii) Another difference that its existence does not destroy the ethical solidarity between societies is the differences of ordering moral standards. Some kinds of variance among cultures take place not in the very nature of their moral standards rather it occurs in the process of ordering them. Two individuals may both accept, for example, the two moral principles of being faithful to one's own convictions and being approved of by the society, yet their behavior may be different, for their choices will be based on the value that each person considers primary in the case of conflict.

Therefore the mere fact of diversity of belief about a subject matter displays nothing particular about that subject matter. Disagreement is consistent with the truth of one culture and the falsity of other. In other words the genesis of a belief is not to be confused with the justification of a belief. (Snare, 1984, p. 215).

Inconsistency of Cultural Relativism

Some philosophers not only claim that too much is made of the moral differences, they also argue that cultural relativism contains the seeds of its own destruction. When we are in foreign circumstances and notice that people behave differently, we are reminded that these actions are consistent with their values and culture. Judging foreigners by the values of our culture is chauvinistic. Who are we to say that our way is better? Here is the problem: Cultural relativism is thought to teach tolerance yet may support intolerance. We are advised to be tolerant of cultural differences, yet the cultural values of a group may demand intolerance.

Respecting cultural values is often a good, but like most good things, it can be taken too far. The cultural relativist refuses to be tolerant when someone violates a cultural standard. Most believe this commitment to a culture's values is a mistake because many cultural standards are arbitrary, harmful, confusing, or even ridiculous. Those who know about other cultures may use that knowledge to reflect on and even reject their own, formerly accepted, standards. Perhaps tolerance should be shown for such people, even by those committed to preserving cultural standards.

Another issue intrudes. Tolerance is taught by the cultural relativist, who says that we should not reject the standards, moral and non-moral, of any culture. But suppose our own culture or subculture is chauvinistic. Are we then obliged to be intolerant? In general, should we be tolerant of the intolerant? Should we tolerate destructive, harmful, hateful, or offensive action done in the name of a cultural commitment?

Cultural relativism is the form of moral relativism which holds that all ethical truth is relative to a specified culture. According to cultural relativism, it is never true to say simply that a certain kind of behavior is right or wrong; rather, it can only ever be true that a certain kind of behavior is right or wrong relative to a specified society.

The cultural relativist might thus be happy to endorse the statement that it is morally wrong to deny women equality in the work-place in modern America, but would not endorse the statement that it is morally wrong to deny women equality in the work-place. The latter statement implies the existence of an objective ethical standard of the kind that cultural relativism rejects. There are societies, the cultural relativist would say, where for historical and cultural reasons it is acceptable that women are limited in their freedom.

The strength of cultural relativism is that it allows us to hold fast to our moral intuitions without having to be judgmental about other societies that do not share those intuitions. If we reject cultural relativism then we face a difficulty: if we are to be consistent about our moral beliefs then it seems that we ought to condemn those past societies that have not conformed to our moral code and perhaps even seek to impose our moral code on those present societies that do not already accept it. This, though, smacks of imperialism, so makes us uneasy.

Cultural relativism allows us to evade this difficulty. On cultural relativism, our moral code applies only to our own society, so there is no pressure on us to hold others to our moral standards at all. On cultural relativism, we can say quite consistently that equality in the work-place is a moral necessity in our society but is inappropriate elsewhere around the globe. In an age where tolerance is increasingly being seen as the most important virtue of all, this can seem to be an attractive position.

This strength of cultural relativism, however, is also its weakness. Cultural relativism excuses us from judging the moral status of other cultures in cases where doing so seems to be inappropriate, but it also renders us powerless to judge the moral status of other cultures in cases where doing so seems to be necessary. Faced with a culture that deems slavery morally acceptable, it seems to be appropriate to judge that society to be morally inferior to our own. Faced with a culture that deems ethnic cleansing morally acceptable, it seems to be appropriate to condemn that society as morally abhorrent.

In order to make such judgments as these, however, we need to be able to invoke an ethical standard that is not culturally relative. In order to make a cross-cultural moral comparison, we need a cross-

cultural moral standard, which is precisely the kind of moral standard that cultural relativism claims does not exist.

CONCLUSIONS

Morality as the main mission of world religion, such as Islam and Christianity is not a matter of desire or culture; rather it is the matter of fact and its factuality is not challenged by the existence of diversity between cultures and societies. The justification of keeping and holding realistic approaches of morality in the presence of cultural diversity relied on our understanding and recognizing in the kind of acceptable diversities and differences that do not create challenge for moral uniformity. Deep consideration into different cultures and societies display that moral norms and standards are the same and unique in essence, and the differences occur in forms and methods, in belief regarding non moral facts, and in ordering the priority of accepted norms and moral standards.

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