

Should We Be Relativists about Morality?¹

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I. Motivations for Moral Relativism

Moral judgments are *normative* or *prescriptive*. Moral judgments do not say how things *are*, but how they *ought* to be.

- *Anti-absolutism* about morality: No act could be *simply* right or wrong; something further has to be specified.
 - Main motivations for anti-absolutism:
 - a. How could there be normative, prescriptive or evaluative facts just sitting out there?
 - b. And how would we know about them?
 - c. And why, if these facts are just sitting out there, is there so much disagreement about them out there in the real world?
- *Theist response*: absolute facts about morality don't just sit out there; they are God's commands.
- *Naturalist response*: moral facts are the judgments of a certain sort of idealized *human* judge.
- *Relativism* gives up on the idea of absolute moral facts, and insists that there are only moral facts relative to a culture.
 - Relativism seemingly enables us to hang onto moral discourse, while giving up on a commitment to puzzling absolute moral facts.

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II. Relativizing the Facts of a Given Domain

What does it mean to ‘relativize’ the facts of a given domain?

Relativism about motion and simultaneity:

- ‘x moves’ gives way to: ‘x moves relative to F.’
- ‘x is simultaneous with y’ gives way to: ‘x is simultaneous with y relative to F.’

None of these F’s is more privileged than any of the others.

Formulating moral relativism:

- ‘x is morally right (wrong)’ gives way to: ‘x is morally right (wrong) relative to F.’

- (1) It is right to educate girls
is replaced with
- (2) It is right to educate girls relative to F.

III. Two Types of Relativism

What is ‘F’ going to be in the moral case?

Here there are two importantly different options and they determine two very different types of view.

Thoroughgoing Relativism about morality:

- ‘x is morally right’
is replaced with
- ‘x is morally right relative to moral code M.’

Absolutist Relativism about morality:

- ‘x is morally right’
is replaced with
- ‘x is morally right relative to its circumstances C.’

IV. Absolutist Relativism is OK

True: (3) Should I stop to help a motorist who has broken down on the side of the road? – The answer is not a straight ‘yes’ or a straight ‘no.’
The correct answer is: It depends on the circumstances.

False: May I abuse children for fun? – It depends on whether you will get caught.

Controversial: May I torture someone to obtain information? – It depends on how large a calamity is at stake...

Why is relativization to circumstances not capable of meeting the original metaphysical and epistemological motivations for relativism?

Because such a relativism does *not* escape a commitment to absolute (and universal) moral facts. What a statement like:

(4) If circumstances are C, then you ought to stop and help the broken-down motorist; but if they are C*, then you are permitted to carry on.

says is that:

(5) It holds for everyone that he/she ought to help if circumstances are C; and it holds for everyone that he/she is permitted to carry on if circumstances are C*.

(6) You ought to do φ if circumstances are C.

(7) You ought to do φ no matter what the circumstances.

V. Thoroughgoing Relativism is not OK

(8) According to moral code M, one ought to do φ if C,

This is not a relativism about moral judgment but an eliminativism or nihilism about it, since *any* trace of normativity in the ‘relativized’ moral judgments has been lost.

(9) It’s right to educate girls according to my moral code.

(10) It’s wrong to educate girls according to the code of the Taliban.

(10) is a *merely descriptive* remark about what particular moral codes do and do not allow with which everyone can agree.

It's in *the very nature* of a normative subject matter that if there are to be moral judgments at all, they have to be meant in an absolutist sense.

VI. What About the Worries that Led to Relativism in the First Place?

What about the original metaphysical and epistemological concerns that made the existence of absolute normative facts so problematic-seeming?

- First, the *metaphysical* question (a): How could there be normative, prescriptive or evaluative facts just sitting out there?

One possible reply: they are not impersonal after all, but are constituted by the verdicts of a certain sort of ideal judge.

But even if we could not make such theories work, we have no choice but to acknowledge at least *some* absolute *normative* facts.

The absolute normative facts that we don't have any choice about acknowledging are facts about *rationality*: facts about what you ought to believe, given the evidence available to you.

Why do we have no choice but to acknowledge facts about rationality?

Because facts about rationality are presupposed by *any* judgment, including the judgment that one ought not to acknowledge facts about rationality.

- Second, the *epistemological* question (b): how do we *know* normative facts?

We are here in the domain of the *a priori*. And we know once again that we *have* to be able to explain at least how *some* a priori knowledge is possible.

Not only because it is overwhelmingly plausible that we have a priori mathematical knowledge.

But also because it is not an option for us to claim that we don't know at least some truths about *rationality* – about what one ought to believe given such and so evidence – and those are equally normative truths.