
CULTURAL RELATIVISM: A MISCONCEPTION OF THE IDEA OF MORAL EVALUATION

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Abstract

Morality has been variously defined in respect to customs and traditions, individual interests, community interests, group interests and so on. Cultural relativism affirms that moral prescriptions and evaluations of actions are basically derived and limited in scope of justification to the culture or society in which it developed. However, it is frequently noted in experience that some moral ideas (even non-moral ideas) cut across cultures all over the world, in other words, they are described as cultural universals.

This paper examines the theoretical basis of cultural relativism as a prescriptive tool for evaluating moral actions. It assesses the idea of moral relativism and how it relates to the fundamental aspect of cultural relativism. It also assesses the structure of the cultural difference argument of cultural relativist as outlined by James Rachels. The objective of this paper is to give an analysis of concepts in cultural relativism as a theory of human ethical interaction and to explicate the deficiency of cultural relativism as a moral system that do not admit proper indication of shared humanity as a fundamental basis that created moral systems.

Introduction

The inevitability of interpersonal relationships in the human society as it is experienced gives rise to the evaluation of actions as conforming or not to moral standards. It is a social fact that cultures differ and if moral sentiments are enshrined in cultural prescriptions, it can be said that moral codes in one culture or society may differ from that of another. However, on what terms can the diverse standards in each society be justified in all instances of evaluating human moral actions?

James Rachels notes that, "our own way of living seems so natural and right for many of us that it is hard to conceive of others living so differently", this is presented in the classic example of the Callatians who customarily ate the bodies of their dead fathers and the Greeks who cremated their dead.¹The concept of morality in the context of different cultures having different moral

codes involves the validity of cultural relativism as a moral theory that holds the view that there is no objective standard of moral conduct. The various standards of morality that are set by different cultures is what gives a prescription for right conduct in their respective societies. The implications that this sort of moral organization will have for the society has been examined by scholars such as Gyekye. It is taken as evident that there are differences in cultures, however, some argue that most cultural differences arise out of various conditions of existence and survival that are of non-moral consequence to the moral agents in their various societies.²

This paper admits that cultural differences influence moral codes and examines other facts of human existence that are universal. It gives critical assessment of cultural relativism as a theoretical basis for the morality of the human society. It argues that cultural relativism as a basis for moral evaluation reduces the universality and rationality of moral standards in the human society to absurdity. The paper concludes that cultural relativism cannot become universally normative and thus it cannot be a plausible moral basis for human actions.

Cultural Difference as a Fact of Human Moral Existence

For Rachels, cultural relativism is more of a social fact than a moral fact. He states that,

....enlightened observers have been accustomed to the idea that conceptions of right and wrong differ from culture to culture. If we assume that our ideas of right and wrong will be shared by all peoples at all times, we are merely naïve.³

Cultural relativism holds that no single moral code should be given a special status, because to assume or accept that a particular moral code is the correct or right one to follow and that another moral code is incorrect or wrong is to imply that there is a universal or objective standard of morality across cultures. However, this does not imply that since different cultures have different moral codes, there is no objective standard of right and wrong.

David Wong states that different cultures have different ways of evaluating actions is an anthropological discovery that is of little or no consequence to the moral status of the society.⁴ Rachels argues that cultural disagreements are a matter of social conventions that are laden with prejudices. Each society has prejudices about how to follow a course of action or evaluate actions. Another point that cultural relativism makes in putting the society in context is that it presents the notion that other cultures and moral codes exists and when it is experienced by people from an alien culture, there is no need to feel repugnant to it. The least that can be done is to keep an open mind and give careful consideration to them (though there can be an idea worth embracing from that culture). This means that being tolerant to a culture that is different from one's

own does not mean accepting it as a universal code. Some scholars do argue that the idea of tolerance itself is a universal prescription.⁵ This will be further discussed in the paper.

The Implausibility and Implications of Cultural Relativism

As a matter of logical formulation, Rachels gives a sort of logical structure of the cultural relativist's argument in order to examine its validity. Rachels identifies six claims made by the cultural relativists⁶:

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal code better than another.
3. The moral code of our society has no special status: it is merely one among many.
4. There is no "universal truth" in ethics-that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.
5. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then it is right at least within that society.
6. It is mere arrogance to try to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance towards the practices of other cultures.

Rachels argues that these claims are independent of one another in their truth. His point of argument holds on the claim of cultural difference and the claim that there is no objective moral truth. The fundamental basis of the cultural relativist theory anchors on the cultural difference argument. It may seem evident that the claim of the cultural relativist argument is plausible, given what actually obtains in the different societies; however, the conclusion for the cultural difference argument is mistaken. For him, the conclusion that there can be no objective moral truth does not necessarily follow from the premise that there are different cultures with different moral codes.⁷ The argument states that,

1. Different cultures have different moral codes.
2. Therefore, there is no objective 'truth' in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

The fundamental idea of the argument is embedded in the difference in cultures not in the existence of moral sensibility in all societies. Rachels implies this by arguing that "the premise contains what people believe in some societies, some people believe one thing; in other societies, people believe differently"⁸.

The case in point that Rachels tries to show here is that morality is restricted to the scope of individual culture in the cultural difference argument and it concerns what really is the case, that is, what obtains morally in different

cultures. In other words, right and wrong are matters of opinion or belief; it is about what actually is the evaluation of actions in a particular society. However, morality is concerned with what should be the case in evaluating human actions as right or wrong, generally.

The view that the objective standard is not known to either or all of the different cultures do not suggest that there is no objective truth⁹. The form or structure of the cultural difference argument therefore fails the test of validity, and this by implication weakens the claim of the cultural relativists. However, it does not outrightly falsify the theory of the cultural relativists. Rachels noted three implications for cultural relativism if taken seriously as a moral theory¹⁰.

First, the idea of tolerance for other cultural practices will make some malevolent social practices immune from criticism (example of the anti-Semitic society, p.654). Second, it restricts the reasoning ability of the moral agent to look beyond the prejudices of his culture. The society's moral code provides all the explanation that can be given for a particular course of action; therefore, there is no need for further probing. However, there are times when questions arise in our minds about the improvement or change of our society's moral code and it is an indication that something can be adjusted in the moral code of that culture¹¹. Third, cultural relativism is antithetical to the idea of change and moral progress. The idea of change suggests that there is a better means of doing things, and this will imply that there is an objective standard of evaluating actions. Rachels' argument implies that the idea of progress is inherent in the nature of human societies which implies that there is a comparison to be made and consequently a judgment to be given.¹²

For the relativist, making such judgments from comparisons cannot hold. This suggests that the idea of cultural relativism is self-defeating. Apart from opposing the view that an objective standard for moral evaluation exists and on this basis of such no judgment can be made; it fails to explain why the theory itself arrives at the conclusion that stands as a moral prescription. If the theory of cultural relativism is put forward as a moral prescription to be adopted in all societies, then it will assume the universal status it denies. This argument may sound simplistic but it can be better appreciated in the description of the cultural relativist program by Keith Dixon. He presents a vivid description of the case the cultural relativist intends to pursue.

The cultural relativist is involved in denying the significance of the universal principles of rationality here adumbrated as being necessary presuppositions of the explanation of human action. His rejection, however, involves the payment of certain costs. First, it requires him to consider only participant intra-cultural accounts of behavior as relevant ;secondly, it condemns him to necessary uncertainty as to

the status of these accounts in that all explanation is allegedly continuously negotiable in principle between participant actors themselves or between participant actors and actor-investigators; thirdly, it denies application of the concept of false-consciousness and, finally, it prohibits inter-cultural comparisons and renders the social world intelligible only by proffering 'explanations' which depend upon cultural consensus or, in the last analysis, idiosyncratic personal perceptions.¹³

It is obvious from this analysis of the claim of cultural relativism given by Dixon that the intelligibility of the social world is cast in a suggestive solipsistic manner for the cultural relativist.

The Basis for Cultural Difference and the Universal Culture in all Societies

Differences in culture as earlier noted are a social fact. Cultural relativism suggests that the disagreement in moral codes arise as a result of the values that are acceptable in each society. Rachels argues that "the disagreement is in the belief systems not in our values".¹⁴ Every society has values that are equally cherished, and the reasons for holding those values may be genuine. Also those values as well as belief systems contribute to the development of moral codes and customs in a society. However, that the belief systems that obtains in different societies tends to oppose each other does not imply that there is a difference about moral values. He notes that, "we cannot conclude, then, merely because customs differ, that there is a disagreement about values". The development of customs in a society anchors on other circumstances than values. The choice of one course of action over another in a society can arise out of religious, economic, and climatic situations. This implies that if belief systems are examined to expose the reasons for holding them, the involvement of values may be minimal and the level of disagreement reduced. Hence the disagreement about values is not as concrete as it seems in the claim of the cultural relativists.

Rachels also argues that there are practices that can be termed cultural universals in every society. In every human society, there are some values that are germane to the existence and sustenance of human social life. This indicates that there is an objective basis for moral evaluation¹⁵. He gives three examples of such values, first is the protection of infants. For him, the protection of infants is a natural consequence of the desire to propagate the human race and to make human society persist. A society whose young ones are not protected will inevitably go into extinction. Second, the notion of truth can be identified in every society. Truth telling enables useful communication and order in the society will be hard to attain or sustain without the

presumption that there is at least an amount of truth in communication between people in the society. Even when there are cases where it is permissible to lie, truth is presumed as favorable in communicating. Third, is the preservation of human life. He argues that the prohibition of murder is a necessary feature of all human societies.¹⁶ If murder were permissible in all societies, then no one will feel safe and the society will eventually collapse because there is the possibility that conflict of interest may arise. However, some will naturally want to guard their lives. In such a society the consequence of this is that people of like interest concerning their continued existence will come together to form a group where acts of murder are prohibited, and so the initial society will disintegrate.

The point that is emphasized in these examples is that some moral rules are universal in all societies and they are also necessary if society is to exist. That there are exceptions to these rules does not imply that there is total disagreement in all moral values in all societies. The disagreement is in itself an indication that there is a basis of agreement.

The Objective Idea of Tolerance, Cross-Cultural Experience and Moral Progress

Of what purpose is the idea of tolerance in the interaction of individuals, cultures and societies? If the idea of tolerance is very well understood by the cultural relativist, it should be well noted that he admits the idea of societal peace and moral serenity. In other words, granted that cultural differences are a fact of existence, there is a need to find a substantive basis for the smooth functioning of the society so the society does not crumble on whatever basis, moral or anthropological. Tolerance allows that everyone overlooks the bias that s/he is exposed to either by culture or independent reason. For Rachels, the idea of tolerance is itself a moral judgment. Moreover, either the cultural relativist denies it or not, he will run into a vicious argument.¹⁷ In the bid to deny the idea of tolerance, there is the need to explain sufficiently how the social fabric can be sustained in the face of cross-cultural infiltration. There are a lot of diverse cultural experiences going on in the world especially with the world becoming a global village; even when there are restraints on cultural borrowings, people are nonetheless exposed to the cultural norms and attitudes of other societies. They become subconsciously judgmental about these 'strange' cultural practices. This moral sensibility (either to accept, reject or be totally unaffected by it as cultural relativism suggests) to the foreign cultural practices cannot be denied, but in the face of cultural interaction, tolerance is unavoidable.

Even the strong version of cultural relativism as Gyekye suggests normative cultural relativism to be cannot escape from this dilemma. If normative cultural relativism is itself a moral prescription that affirms being non-evaluative of other cultural values, then it cannot deny that the idea of

tolerance is necessary for the sustenance of society. Such denial will imply that other categories of the society will suffer the implications. For instance, in this era of global commerce and economic transformation, a culture that produces iron metals and where it is believed that every manufactured iron metal should be first dedicated to a 'god' will have to tolerate a culture that is ready to purchase such goods whose belief as regards the product is to yield industrial profit, in which case for the purchasing culture, dedication to a 'god' is of irrelevant purpose, meeting up with demand is what is germane though it does not repel the producing culture for its belief. Thus, it can be said that the denial of the idea of tolerance will lead the global society to a state of "each man to his own country" which will be a morally solipsistic attitude. Dixon further implies that a solipsistic degeneration such as this will lead the cultural relativist account into a *reductio ad absurdum*. This is because it will negate the underlying principle of the relativist argument that moral truth is relative to cultures.

On the other hand, if the cultural relativist accepts the idea of tolerance, which is conceived as objective, then it implies that there is an exception to the principle of cultural relativism. As much as universalists make the claim that there are objective moral standards, it cannot be denied that there are cultural constraints on behavior and morality in the society that makes it hard, if not impossible, to follow any objective standard of morality. Furthermore, if the idea of tolerance is accepted as socially necessary, it implies that moral evaluation can be made trans-culturally. I can make a judgment about the repulsive attitude of someone to a cultural practice that is not his/hers and such evaluation will not be attributed to being intrinsic to any cultural underpinnings.

The history of societies indicates that the idea of progress is also a fact of human existence just as cultural differences are. The review of social beliefs and attitudes towards certain cultural practices show that moral progress occurs. Progress generally means replacing a way of doing things with a better way.¹⁸ Even intra-culturally, change occurs and foreign cultural influence does not necessarily have to be the harbinger of a change of cultural attitudes towards progress. Cultural relativism tends to deny this view. If cultural relativists allow for social reform and progress in a very limited way as intra-cultural change, the burden is on them to properly explicate the idea of change and the process that brought about the need for change. The proposals for change based on foreign cultural influence can be dispensed by the cultural relativist, but what of internally generated cultural change?

As cited above from Dixon, cultural consensus and idiosyncratic personal prescriptions are favoured by the cultural relativist. However, it is noteworthy to identify the principle of rationality in the project of the cultural relativist. There are reasons for change in intra-cultural situations. These reasons are derived with reference to comparisons between existing fact and assumed

consequences for the society with the aim of making things better, in other words, make progress. Cultural consensus is of itself a questionable concept put forward by cultural relativists, one can only wonder if all members of a community does give consent to a moral prescription, or if there are some minority who dissent and only abide by (or tolerate) those prescriptions for the sake of societal peace. It is conceivable therefore that such prescriptions made by majority consensus can be dispensed with later and replaced with another. It implies that change and progress are products of rational deliberation in any society. Dixon makes a strong point on this note,

If one sees the world only through the categories of one's culture, form of life or ultimately one's own idiosyncratic perceptions, when consensus collapses, arbitration is not possible.¹⁹

Dixon suggests furthermore that it is in the concept of rationality that the world and social issues that exist in it can be made intelligible²⁰. In the concept of rationality, change is permissible. This allows an individual or society to decide between competing issues and humans are always presented with choices in nature. This implies that either inter-culturally or intra-culturally, so long as change occurs and choices are made, the principle of rationality is not culture-relative. If this is so, we can rightly say then that the notion of rationality itself is not culture-bound.

Though rationality as employed in different cultures may produce diverse results and practices as can be seen in the case of the Callatians and the Greek who both think it rational to honour their dead, however they carry out the practice of honour in different ways. Arriving at such a cultural prescription for honour involves moral deliberation as to how honour should be bestowed and a consensus was arrived at, but the cultural invariant 'honour' remains undisturbed in the clashes of cultural liberalities that may occur between societies. If the value, 'honour' is such a thing that is regarded as contributing to the cultural foundations of the society towards progress and peace in the society, it is unlikely that it will change by any form of consensus, what will and can change is the factual expression of the value. In other words, no matter how much the society reaches agreement on moral issues, the nexus (values) of the issues are mostly unaffected, what is being considered and reconsidered is the factual execution of such values.

Since intelligibility is what enables us to make sense of the world we live in and it is rationality that provides such access, it then seems that whatever cultural relativism seeks to make us understand (tolerance, difference, etc) is subject to how we make use of our moral responsibility which will imply that rationality is always in play.

The Notion of Universality of Human Nature

Rationality is at the core of the universal human nature. This does not imply that rationality means logicity neither does it imply that there is a distinction between what is right and what is wrong. Rationality then is that conscious deliberation about an issue such that patterns of thought are generated from which decisions to follow one course of action rather than another is made with a sense of justification that such course of action will create a desired goal. It could be that such action will be logical or not. Hence, if rationality is taken in morality, as a conscious deliberation of moral attitude without the evaluation of one act in a culture in comparison with another as either good or bad, then cultural relativism affirms the universality of rationality. All men go through the process of moral deliberation before an action is decided to be adjudged good or bad.

Some human values that present themselves as cultural invariants have been mentioned above, such as truth-telling, sanctity of human life, sustenance of the human race through the protection of its infants. I will here note some more; in all societies, there is a notion of good hygiene. For instance, even in the crudest of societies, human, animal or biological waste is regarded as unfit to be where humans carry out other activities such as sleeping, eating or cooking. The idea of living where 'wastes' such as faeces and debris, is repugnant to the idea of sound health such that one who lives on a refuse dump is regarded as being mentally deranged or unstable. Even if a person is a scavenger on a refuse dump, s/he is still aware that the place is unfit for him/her to live and a neater place of abode will readily be preferable to him/her than the refuse dump. Furthermore, it can be noted that our identification as human beings makes us liable to choose a particular course of action with other individuals. The apportioning of blame or praise for an action comes as *de facto* evaluation that arises only among human beings. A pet dog who pulls away a plate of food meant for an individual cannot be blamed as the person who puts the food there or who was present when the dog committed the act. This is to show that there is a level of commitment that is expected of human actions. What develops such notions as suggested by Gyekye is the universal human essence in all individuals.²¹ There is a basic sense of right and wrong in humans even if they are exhibited through different ways.

Another feature of human societies is the feeling of pleasure. The feeling of pleasure is favoured above that of displeasure, what brings the pleasure may differ in one society from another but the disposition to pleasurable things remain constant. Therefore, for a masquerade worshipper who has a disposition to pleasure when beaten with canes in society 'A' and an individual who in society 'B' displays pleasure at the law passed against gay rights, the underlying notion is the same.

It thus clearly shows that the cultural relativist creates an identity for factual judgments which overshadows value judgments. The bulk of what can be learned from cultural relativism is restricted majorly to the scholarly platform from which it arose, that is anthropological studies. The common nature in human beings necessarily conduces individuals to act in certain ways than others. Gyekye mentioned the idea of human flourishing and human well-being, the development of concepts is borne out of universal human values.

Conclusion

Independent moral judgments do not appear to be plausible in the face of the factual claims that cultural relativism makes. The facts that humans exist in societies and are faced with the responsibility of acting along moral lines that obtain in their respective societies seem to defeat the acceptance of universal moral standards. Furthermore, the idea of tolerance in cultural relativism is stressed beyond reasonable measure. The view that a particular conduct is tolerated does not mean it should not be questioned; tolerance should not be misconceived as assent. Furthermore, the notion of tolerance itself can be taken to be a morally objective truth.²²

The distinctions usually made between values and belief system is vague. If belief systems arise out of situations of existence, can the same not be said for our values? If we affirm this, it implies that the basis of the cultural difference argument is acceptable. However, if there is the denial that our belief systems and values do not have the same source, that is, from interpersonal and social experience, then there is yet the challenge of identifying the basis of our values.

For instance, while rejecting the cultural relativist argument, Rachels' view on the whole does not prove that there are objective standards of right and wrong. It is suggestive that the strength of his argument hangs on the claim that there are cultural universals to suggest the existence of objective standards of morality, then his argument is also unsound. If his argument is formally presented as follows;

- (a) All cultures have values
 - (b) Some values have universal moral status
- Therefore,
- (c) All cultures have universal moral status

The truth of the conclusion is questionable given (b). if (b) is replaced with "some values have no universal moral status" then the conclusion as a general statement fails. This shows that the argument also fails the test of truth and validity. This logical construction does not address the argument of cultural relativism.

However, the argument of cultural relativist also falls into the same logical error. As shown in the cultural difference argument cited earlier, the argument

moves from factual premises to a non-factual conclusion. From empirically based facts of existence, one cannot derive a conclusion of non-factual consequence. Cultural practices are factual but the recommendation arrived at which serves as the moral prescription for the cultural relativist is itself non-factual. There is no empirical grounding for the idea that no objective truth in morality can be established and that it is only a matter of opinion that there are right and wrong actions.

Rachels' view of the cultural universality of some moral values presents a dilemma for the cultural relativist who is basically concerned with how actions are done in the society rather than why it is done the way it is and if it should be done the way it is. The burden lies on the cultural relativist to show the extent to which his moral theory can hold in the face of perennial changes that societies go through and why those changes have to occur in the first place if it is not to be regarded solely as a theory of socio-cultural existence only. Gyekye however alludes to the essentiality of the human nature as the basis for moral actions. If Gyekye's argument against normative cultural relativism is elaborated, it will mean that nothing can be salvaged from it as a basis of moral evaluation. It then means that we are left with nothing but descriptive cultural relativism in the long run and it will be of no consequence to morality.

Cultural relativism is attractive in so far as it enlightens us about the diversity of cultural practices. However, as a basis for moral evaluation it fails to achieve the purpose for evaluation itself and humans everywhere hold that disposition to carry out moral deliberation intra or inter-culturally. It only affirms that moral evaluations and standards of morality do change in the long run and cross-cultural exchange cannot be avoided even when cultural relativism implicitly denies it. The outbreaks of war and disputes all over the world suffice to show that there are non-stop moral deliberations either at the individual or societal level.

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