

Is This the Very Best Argument for Ethical Relativism?

The evaluation-requires-standards argument is indeed the very best argument for ethical relativism. But is it sound?

The central thesis of ethical relativism:

An action is right only to the extent that it honours (by expressing or promoting) the values embedded in the folkways of the culture of the person who performed it.

Note: Ethical relativism is consistent with the claim that any action or practice wrong in one culture is wrong in all cultures. The contention that all cultures have the same core values embedded in their folkways does not imply that ethical relativism is false.

Ethical relativism is a thesis regarding what makes ethically sound actions ethically sound and ethically unsound actions ethically unsound. It says that the soundness of sound actions is relative to background values and, thus, is not a quality internal to actions themselves.

The thesis of inter-cultural value-difference:

The folkways of different cultures embed different values.

People of different cultures express and promote different (perhaps conflicting) fundamental values.

The thesis of ethical relativism and the thesis of inter-cultural value-difference together imply that:

Some actions that are perfectly ethically sound actions for a person of one culture to perform are not actions that would be ethically sound actions for a similarly situated person of another culture to perform.

An illustration of this implication:

Betty is with five other people chatting and sipping champagne at a wedding reception. Betty says, "Well, I thought only Martin went in for finger foods." Every one of the five cracks up with laughter, except Martin, who, cut to the core, can manage only a sad smile before slinking away.

Sally is with five other people chatting and sipping champagne at a wedding reception. Sally says, "Well, I thought only Artie went in for finger foods." Every one of the five cracks up with laughter, except Artie, who, cut to the core, can manage only a sad smile before slinking away.

In Betty's culture, people tend to value people's feelings over getting off good ones. And so, what Betty did was ethically wrong. She ought to have refrained from making that remark.

In Sally's culture, people tend to value wit and laughter over people's feelings. And so, what Sally did was ethically all right. She didn't do anything wrong, though Artie's feelings were hurt; perhaps Sally would have been wrong to have refrained from making that remark, for she would have been denying her companions an opportunity for laughter.

Other illustrations could involve:

Seeking revenge; teasing children; beating one's spouse; excluding women from public life; infanticide; abortion; bear-baiting; polygamy; free-loading; clitoridectomy; nepotism; bribe-taking; private property...

The Evaluation-Requires-Standards Argument for Ethical Relativism

(This is the very best argument for ethical relativism. Yet it fails to establish its conclusion.)

The key idea in the following argument for the central thesis of ethical relativism:

The only standards by which it makes sense to evaluate an action are the standards within the culture of the agent who performed the action. No other standards are appropriate.

"This is a terrible apple. It's the wrong colour, its skin is thick and inedible, its seeds are dispersed throughout it, and it is much too juicy and sweet."

—Don't judge it according the standards by which we judge apples! It didn't come from an apple tree. Thus it is not appropriate to apply those standards to it. Judge it instead according to the standards by which we judge oranges.

An argument that the only appropriate standards of ethical evaluation are those of the culture within which the action to be judged is found:

1. To evaluate an action as right or wrong is to measure it using some particular standards or values.
2. To evaluate an action according to the standards or values of the culture to which its agent belongs is to evaluate it against standards or values appropriate to it.

3. To evaluate an action according to the standards or values of a different culture is to ask it to answer to foreign standards or values.

4. It's simply arbitrary and, thus, inappropriate to evaluate an action against foreign standards or values.

Therefore:

5. Actions are ethically sound or unsound only relative to the standards and values internal to the culture of the agent who performed the action.

Explain why this argument is unsound:

Mark's explanation:

1) The evaluation-requires-standards argument is the very best argument for ethical relativism. (I know of none better.)

2) Nonetheless, the evaluation-requires-standards argument is fallacious and cannot be salvaged.

The problem with the argument is that standards are not the appropriate standards by which to evaluate something merely in virtue of being some culture's (or some person's) usual or preferred standards.

The standards by which one evaluates something are appropriate or inappropriate standards only given some reason one has for evaluating the thing. These reasons, in turn, are good or bad only given ends that one seeks to fulfil by evaluating the thing.

So, the standards by which I evaluate what you do as right, wrong, or indifferent are appropriate standards when and only when they work well in the context of the task I have set myself. Whatever the standards are by which I evaluate your actions, they are appropriate standards, whether they are also your standards or not, so long as they generate evaluations that help me in my task.

Premise 4 is simply false. One's choice to use one's own standards of evaluation, however they came to be one's standards, is not (need not be) an arbitrary choice at all.