

## Relativism and tolerance

The Cranky Professor

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Relativism about value is the thesis that what makes an action right is simply that it conforms to the norms or codes of the culture of which the person whose action it is is a member. What makes an action wrong is that it fails to conform or violates those norms or codes. The relativist thought is that one is acting well just if one is doing the sort of thing that's done around here, while one is acting badly just if one is out of line with what's done around here.

Relativism, I hazard to say, is the theory of value to which the majority of students at Saint Mary's subscribe. I bet that most students here would agree that a person is not at all acting wrongly if what that person is doing is in line with the values embedded in the folkways of his or her culture.

Relativism is popular, I again hazard, because tolerance is popular and relativism seems to imply that we all should be tolerant of each other's ways. It is wrong to interfere with someone who isn't acting badly, runs this thought, and since people aren't acting badly when they are acting in conformity with the norms of their culture, we would be wrong to interfere with someone who is acting in conformity with the norms of his culture, even should what he is doing be something wrong for one of us to do.

The most common argument in favour of relativism, an argument heard with depressing frequency, goes like this: People from different cultures disagree with each other about right and wrong; therefore, whether an act is right or wrong depends on which culture one has in mind. This argument is absolutely dreadful. If it were strong, then so, too, would be this argument: Paleontologists from different universities disagree with each other about the origin of birds; therefore, whether birds evolved from dinosaurs or instead evolved from another class of reptile depends on which university one has in mind.

A better argument in favour of relativism begins with the thought that when we evaluate something, we do so against a set of standards. To evaluate something correctly, though, means evaluating it against an appropriate set of standards. Thus, to evaluate an action correctly, one must evaluate it using appropriate standards. The only appropriate standards by which to evaluate an action are the standards of the culture to which the agent of the action belongs. Therefore, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the standards of the culture to which the agent of the action belongs.

This argument fails. What makes a set of standards an appropriate set by which to evaluate something is not that that set is used by some group of people. It is, rather, that that set serves the purpose you want it to serve—you, the person doing the evaluating—and serves that purpose well.

If you have reason to evaluate an action by what you take to be the standards of your culture, your reason is not that they are the standards of your culture. It is, rather, that you will serve your purpose well by using those standards.

Relativism about value is beset by all sorts of conceptual troubles. For one, if relativism is true, then psychological, sociological, or anthropological knowledge suffices for ethical knowledge. If you want to know whether it would be all right for you to reveal Martha's secret in order to protect Sally, ask a sociologist. For another, we all belong to many cultures. What's wrong in one is right in another. Revealing Martha's secret in order to protect Sally is for you both right and wrong. For a third, the relativist's prime directive—do what in your culture is the thing to do—cannot, for the relativist, be sound merely relative to a culture.

Relativism, then, is ill-supported by argument and most likely false. Should we be worried, then, about our commitment to tolerance? No, we shouldn't, for relativism doesn't in fact support tolerance. Whether you are wrong to try to impose your way of life on others, the relativist must say, depends on the values embedded in the folkways of your culture. If you belong to a tolerant culture, then it would be wrong for you to treat others intolerantly. But if you belong to an intolerant culture, then it would be wrong for you to refrain from forcing your ways on others. The lesson of these reflections? If you are looking for a reason to support your commitment to tolerance, look not to your culture but to tolerance itself.

Does this mean, then, that there is one true morality after all? That if we are properly to commit ourselves to tolerance, tolerance must be a true value? Not at all. Recall the relativist's prime directive: do what in your culture is the thing to do. Hearing this, one's first thought is why should I do that? That something is the done thing around here ought to leave one cold. If you have a reason in a case to do the done thing around here, it certainly isn't that it is the done thing around here. Now consider the directive: do the right thing, the thing that honours the true values. One's first thought ought also to be why should I do that?

If you have a reason to do the right thing, your reason isn't that it's the right thing to do.