

## Humanities profs aren't really moral relativists

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Mark Mercer  
Department of Philosophy  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3  
(902) 420-5825  
[mark.mercer@smu.ca](mailto:mark.mercer@smu.ca)

Are today's humanities and social science professors and their students relativists about value, as *Citizen* contributor Richard Bastien asserts ("In defence of moral absolutes," Aug. 8)? Some are, but probably not many, as relativism is beset by problems too plainly visible for even the dimmest undergraduate to miss.

Yet professors and their students are not, by and large, objectivists about value, either. I'd characterize the majority as value pluralists, though a distinct minority are subjectivists (I count myself in this latter camp).

Relativism about value is the thesis that an action is right only to the extent that that action is in line with values embedded in the folkways of the culture to which the agent of that action belongs. A person belonging to a culture in which humour is valued above sparing people's feelings would act well to get a laugh by insulting someone's shoes, while a person belonging to a culture in which sparing people's feelings is valued above humour would act wrongly. The argument in favour of the thesis of relativism is that there can be no standards of value behind those within particular ways of life, no independent standards, that is, by which it could be appropriate to evaluate particular ways of life.

People who value tolerance towards others sometimes think their tolerance is supported by the thesis of relativism. After all, if a person is doing no wrong in acting in conformity with the mores of her culture, it would be wrong to interfere with her. But this argument involves taking the second occurrence of "wrong" in an objective sense. It's wrong, full stop, the argument says, to interfere with what isn't wrong relative to cultural mores.

What relativism actually implies is that members of those cultures marked by tolerance are right to be tolerant of others and their ways, while members of those cultures marked by violent intolerance are equally right to be violently intolerant.

Now suppose you want to know what to do with regard to abortion, or lying to friends for their own good, or freedom of expression. How are you to investigate the matter so as to fashion a reasoned commitment? If you accept relativism about value, the answer is easy. Ask a sociologist or anthropologist who has studied your culture. She'll let you know what among your people is the done thing. Then you will know what's right or wrong for you.

No one who thinks this is just asinine can be a relativist. As almost all of us think this is just asinine, only few of us could be relativists.

The view about the nature of value prevalent in the academy today, I suspect, is pluralism, not relativism. The pluralist holds that there are many ways in which to live a good life, many different values worth honouring. But not every value worth honouring is consistent with every other. Personal autonomy can clash with harmonious social relations, liberty with equality. And yet, says the pluralist, autonomy, harmony, liberty, equality—each is a true value around which a culture can organize itself to support human flourishing. Some cultures lean more one way than another way, some try to strike a balance. Each is right in its own terms, though, for each honours true ultimate values, and ultimate values can be arranged in different hierarchies.

But not every way of life is a way in which to lead a good life. Inequality, repression, slavery, even death and destruction—a culture might well have one or more of these at its centre. Because these negative values fail, or worse, to promote human flourishing, they can be criticized wherever they are found. The pluralist has the resources to condemn the unethical even while celebrating the irreducible diversity of admirable cultures.

Or so at least the pluralist thinks. Having it both ways might just not be possible. Objectivists about value are rightly criticized for pulling right and wrong out of a hat. Pluralists propose, with the relativists, that values are many and sometimes incommensurable, but reject relativism by asserting that some values are true values. In doing so, they seem to have borrowed the hat.

Relativism, pluralism, objectivism: are we stranded here? Are we condemned to hold either the social scientist or the mystic our authority on ethics? (That the mystic is an analytic philosopher makes her no less a mystic, and neither does that she is the individual's conscience or soul.)

Well, there is the thesis that while a person values one or another thing for its own sake, really nothing has value in itself. It's all just taste and emotion. I commend that thesis to those thinking about these things as both true and inspiring.