

Chapter Seven: Relativism about Value

1. *The central thesis of relativism about value*

Relativism about value accepts that some actions are right and some actions are wrong (and most actions are neither right nor wrong but are ethically neutral; we can say of ethically neutral actions that they are all right). What makes an action right, on the relativist conception, is that that action honours values embedded in the folkways of the culture to which the person who performed that action belongs.

If, then, it is right for a person S in circumstances C to perform action X, then performing X in C conforms to norms embedded in the folkways of the culture to which S belongs.

That Sally did the kind or fair thing does not itself make what Sally did the right thing for her to have done. What Sally did was right only if, first, what she did was kind or fair according to the standards or conceptions of kindness or fairness authoritative in her culture and, second, reacting with kindness or fairness in such a situation is in line with the mores of her culture.

We can imagine a culture in which finders-keepers or, even, thievery honours background mores and values. In this culture, those who find or steal your property will not be inclined to give it back and the authorities will not seek to return your lost property to you. Perhaps the thieves and everyone else will mock your ridiculous attempts to regain your property. If you want it so much, you should have protected it better.

In this culture, it is all right to keep found or stolen property. Members of the culture do nothing wrong and do not act badly when they take and keep what belongs to others (what belonged to another up to the moment it was appropriated by another).

Shouldn't this culture we're imagining have instead different background mores and values so that practices such as finders-keepers and thievery are outlawed or, at least, suppressed by shaming and ostracism? Not according to relativism about value. Those who appropriated your property did nothing wrong, for to act wrongly is to act against the values embedded in the folkways of the culture. The finders and thieves didn't act against their culture's values. Indeed, they acted rightly. They saw something they wanted and they were able to take it; so they took it. That's exactly what they should have done, given who they are.

2. *The thesis of intercultural value difference*

The folkways of different cultures embed different norms and values. That is the thesis of intercultural value difference. The denial of this thesis is that the folkways of all cultures embed the same norms and values or, at least, the same deep or basic norms and values. If you think that there's a common human nature and a common human condition, then you might be inclined to reject the thesis of intercultural value difference. (The idea that there is a common human nature and common human condition does not, though, imply that the folkways of every culture embed exactly the same norms and values. That there's a common human nature only *suggests* that all human cultures are alike when it comes to deep or basic values. It's certainly possible that groups of people sharing a common human nature could value very different things.)

It's a matter of fact, says the thesis of intercultural value difference, that the folkways of different cultures embed different norms and values. It just happens that people of different cultures express and promote different (perhaps conflicting) fundamental values. The thesis is, then, neutral on the question what norms and values *should* be embedded in the folkways of this or that culture. As far as the thesis itself goes, it might be true that all people, though they differ in the values they live by, should live by the same particular values. (They should all organize their societies to maximize the happiness of the majority or the worst off, one could think. Or they should all be such that people treat others always with respect or kindness.) As well, as far as the thesis goes, it might be that each culture that is doing just fine in its own terms should maintain its ways, perhaps because no standard of doing fine other than its own standard can have any relevance or authority regarding its ways (this is a contention within the theory of relativism about value).

If we hold both the thesis of value relativism and the thesis of intercultural value-difference together, we would be committed, it would seem, to the claim that some actions that are perfectly sound actions for a person of one culture to perform are not actions that would be sound actions for a similarly situated person of another culture to perform.

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

Now, consider Sally. 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 wrong. She ought to have refrained from making that remark, funny though it was.

In Sally's culture, though, people tend to value humour over people's feelings. And so, what Sally did was perfectly all right. She didn't do anything wrong, even though Artie's feelings were hurt; perhaps Sally even would have been wrong to have refrained from making that remark, for she would thereby have been depriving the crowd of a laugh.

Everything about the two events is the same except for the wider cultures in which the two scenarios are located. Those wider cultures differ in their background mores or values. Betty's culture is one in which people's good feelings count as more important than humour while Sally's culture is one in which humour counts as more important than people's good feelings. In Betty's culture, it is wrong to embarrass someone even to get a good laugh while in Sally's culture it's perfectly fine to embarrass someone in the service of getting a good laugh.

Here's another illustration: "It's wrong to kill a healthy baby" is true when spoken by a Haligonian in 2021 but would have been false spoken by an Inuit on Baffin Island in 1913. "It's perfectly all right for parents to kill their own healthy baby (so long as no one will adopt it)" was true when spoken by an Inuit on Baffin Island in 1913 but is false when spoken by a Haligonian in 2021.

The erstwhile Inuit custom of killing unwanted infants was a sound custom in Inuit culture as it then existed. It was sound because the culture supported it. The custom aligned with or expressed values embedded in Inuit folkways. In Halifax (and on Baffin Island) these days, though, it is wrong to kill an infant, whether wanted or unwanted by its parents. The culture that supported the custom of killing unwanted infants no longer exists. The current culture's value system makes infanticide wrong.

3. *The cultural differences argument for relativism about value*

Let us assume that the thesis of intercultural value difference is true. It certainly appears on the surface to be true. In one culture, we are assuming, people honour certain values while in another culture, people honour different values. Let us further assume that some of the values they honour conflict. On the north side of the river is a culture that prizes self-reliance above soliciting help while on the south side of the river is a culture that values soliciting help above self-reliance. The Northerners' is a dignity culture; the Southerners' is an honour culture. (We can suppose that in the north culture, people would typically be embarrassed to complain about having been offended while in the south culture, people would typically be proud to have the courage to complain about having been offended.)

Therefore, it is possible for people of different cultures to honour conflicting values. (If in fact cultures *do* conflict in the values they honour, then, obviously, it must be *possible* for cultures to conflict in the values that they honour.) But that possibility implies that there is no objective facts or universally applicable truths about which values are sound values.

And so we must conclude that the thesis of relativism about value is true. Whether an action is right or wrong (or neither) is a matter of the values honoured in the culture to which the person who performed the action belongs.

The above argument, the cultural differences argument, can be criticized at various points. For one, the argument gives us no reason to think that cultures can differ in core ethical values. Perhaps the differences we find culture to culture are fairly shallow, and rest on deeper shared values. Perhaps the practices in a particular culture honour the same deep values as different practices do in another culture, even though those practices repel the members of the other culture. (It might be that tolerance of infanticide in 19th-century Inuit culture expressed in an unforgiving climate and landscape the same reverence for community survival and continuity that taboos on infanticide honour in contemporary Halifax culture or contemporary Inuit culture.)

Indeed, there are reasons for thinking that all cultures must honour most of the values within a narrow set of core values. A culture in which people often fail to honour many of the values in this core set will likely fail to sustain itself for long. Of course, we would need to hear from anthropologists, sociologists and historians to know whether cultures that stray from the values that mean the most to us tend to fail or disappear. Without real-life examples, we really cannot know what is possible and what is impossible for human societies.

For another problem with the argument, consider the inference from the fact (supposing it is a fact) that cultures can honour conflicting values to the claim that that there is no objective or universally applicable truth about which values are sound values. This inference is extremely weak. That two

cultures might honour conflicting values has nothing to do with whether a culture should honour the values it does. Perhaps it honours false values, values that conflict with the true values other cultures honour.

The next inference in the argument appears to be weak, as well. Let's suppose that there is no objective truth about which values are sound values and which are unsound. Supposing there is no objective truth does not by itself imply that being right or wrong is a matter of the values honoured in the culture to which the person who performed the action belongs. The argument seems to assume that there are only two options: values are objectively sound or they are sound only relative to cultures; thus, if they are not objectively sound, they are sound only relative to cultures. But this neglects a third possibility. That possibility is that nothing is right and nothing is wrong. Neither objective reality nor conformity with background standards makes an action right, the critic of this inference would say, for actions are neither right nor wrong.

We might also note that if the thesis of value relativism is true, then one is right to prefer fairness or honesty to prudence or prudence to fairness or honesty according to the values embedded in the background mores of one's culture. Those cultures in which prudential values outweigh ethical ones (for want of a better description) are cultures in which the right thing to do is to forsake the ethical and do the ethically wrong thing when doing the ethically right thing would be foolish.

4. An inference-to-the-best-explanation argument for relativism about value

It is possible for people of different cultures to honour conflicting values with regard to even the most fundamental ethical matters. Let us assume that that is true, though we would need results from social sciences in order to have good evidence either way.

A second argument for relativism about value builds on the observation that some cultures conflict with others on basic values. How can we explain that some cultures conflict with other cultures on basic values? Values, it would seem, cannot be like rocks or rivers, for different cultures cannot generally differ about what rocks and rivers are, how they behave or where they are located. People who were apt to try to drink rocks or use rivers as building materials wouldn't fare well in the world. That is because there are culture-independent facts about the nature and location of rocks and rivers. Rocks and rivers impose themselves on our thoughts and do so so insistently that most of the beliefs about them of anyone who has experienced them have to be true. If, to consider the impossible, the people in some culture aren't usually getting the facts about rocks and rivers right, they will either abandon that culture or die; either way, their culture will eventually disappear.

From these reflections we can see that if there were culture-independent facts regarding right and wrong, it wouldn't be possible for people of different cultures to honour conflicting values about fundamental ethical matters, at least not for long. That is because culture-independent facts regarding right and wrong would make some values sound and others unsound. Of any two conflicting values, only one can be sound. The people who honour the unsound value would eventually come to grief, just as the people who haven't figured out rocks and rivers would eventually come to grief.

Thus, the best explanation how it is possible for two cultures to differ over fundamental values is that there are no facts about values independent of cultures. If there are no facts about values independent of cultures, then facts about values are created by cultures themselves. But if facts about values are created by cultures themselves, then right and wrong are relative to the mores embedded in the culture's folkways.

A short version of this argument goes like this: Either an action is right or wrong by virtue of culture-independent facts or it is right or wrong by virtue of culture-dependent facts. Since cultures can differ drastically in the values they honour, actions are not right or wrong by virtue of culture-independent facts. Thus actions are right or wrong by virtue of culture-dependent facts. Therefore: Whether an action is right is a matter of the values honoured in the culture to which the person who performed the action belongs.

A serious flaw in this argument is that it assumes that there are facts by virtue of which actions are right or wrong (or neutral, neither right nor wrong). The facts are either objective and culture independent or dependent on features of culture. If something is either A or B and it's not A, it must be B. And so the argument concludes that the facts by which values are sound and actions right must be facts that are dependent on culture. Hence, the thesis of the relativity of value has to be true and any thesis that conflicts with it has to be false.

But we may not simply assume that there are only two options here. A third option, again, is that there are no facts at all—that is, there are no facts by virtue of which values are sound or actions are right. That there are no facts about value to get right would explain very well why different societies are able to differ widely in the values embedded in their folkways and in their permissions and prohibitions. The absence of constraining facts makes all sorts of constructions possible.

5. The evaluation-requires-standards argument for relativism about value

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. That's the key idea in the following argument for the central thesis of relativism about value.

“This is a terrible apple. It's an absurd colour, its skin is thick and inedible, its seeds are dispersed throughout it, and it is much too juicy and sweet.”

Don't judge that particular “apple” according to the standards by which we judge real apples! That “apple” didn't come from an apple tree and it's not actually an apple. Thus, it is not appropriate to apply apple standards to it. Judge it instead according to the standards by which we judge oranges.

Here is an argument that the only appropriate standards of evaluation are those of the culture within which the action to be judged is found. To evaluate an action as right or wrong is to measure it using some particular values or standards. Each culture has embedded within its customs, traditions and institutions certain values and standards of action. Now, to evaluate an action according to the values or standards of the culture to which its agent belongs is to evaluate it against appropriate values or standards, but to evaluate an action according to the values or standards of a different culture is to ask it to answer to foreign values or standards. But holding something to

answer to values or standards foreign to it is improper, intolerant, imperialist or otherwise mistaken. Thus, it's wrong to evaluate an action against foreign values or standards. Therefore, actions are right or wrong only relative to the values and standards internal to the culture of the agent who performed the action.

In short, to evaluate something you have to evaluate it against standards or values, but to evaluate it properly, you have to evaluate it against appropriate standards or values. The only standards or values appropriate to evaluating good and bad or right and wrong are the standards or values present in the culture of the thing to be evaluated.

You might think to ask about the role within the standards argument of the concept of being appropriate. Consider the claim that the only standards that are appropriate by which to evaluate an action are the standards within the relevant culture. Is the claim to be taken as independent of cultures and to have universal force? Then there exists a culture independent standard and the claim is false. Is the claim to be taken as saying that whatever standards are found in the culture, those are the correct standards (for those in that culture)? Then cultures that judge all fruit by apple standards are correct to do so, for that is their way.

The most serious problem with this argument is that standards are not the appropriate standards by which to evaluate something merely by virtue of being some culture's (or some person's) usual or preferred standards. Rather, the standards by which one evaluates something are appropriate or inappropriate standards only given some reason one has for evaluating the thing. One's reason, in turn, is 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, whatever that task is.

Judge the orange by apple standards, then, if what you are looking for is a good apple. Judged against your apple standards, that orange comes up woefully short. That it is a bad apple is just what you need to know to get on with whatever it is you are doing. Evaluating it by orange standards would have been beside the point.