

SOME ETHICAL VOCABULARY

The following vocabulary might help us in our discussions:

- An action is *morally permissible* iff morality permits it. This doesn't mean that morality "encourages" it or "requires" it; it just means that morality allows it, or considers it acceptable. Examples: smoking cigarettes in private, watching TV, veganism, and donating one's life savings to charity.
- An action is *morally required* iff it must be performed in order to avoid a moral wrong. Example: taking care of one's underage children. Actions might be morally permissible without being morally required, but cannot be morally required without being morally permissible. Example: smoking in private is morally permissible but not morally required.
- An action is *morally impermissible* iff morality prohibits it. Examples: killing without reason, stealing without reason, lying without reason.

When philosophers talk about what's "right", they usually mean what's *morally required*. When they talk about what's "wrong", they usually mean what's *morally impermissible*.

WHAT KINDS OF CLAIMS ARE RELATIVE?

Consider the following statements, and decide whether you agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with each of them.

1. 600 years ago, people believed the world was flat. Therefore, the earth was flat 600 years ago.
2. 70 years ago, it was considered polite for men to order meals for women in restaurants. Therefore, it was polite for men to order meals for women in restaurants 70 years ago.
3. Most Americans don't believe that climate change is a serious problem. Therefore, in the US, climate change isn't a serious problem.
4. Before the 1970s, the term "sexual harassment" didn't exist. Therefore, there was no sexual harassment until the 1970s.
5. 200 years ago, slavery was considered morally permissible in the US. Therefore, slavery was morally permissible in the US 200 years ago.
6. In the US, most people eat meat. Therefore, it's morally permissible to eat meat.

THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ARGUMENT

Cultural moral relativism is the metaethical view that the truth of moral claims is relative to a culture's beliefs.

The most common defense of cultural moral relativism is the cultural differences argument:

- P1. Different cultures disagree about moral claims.
- P2. If different cultures disagree about moral claims, then the truth of those claims are relative to each culture.
- C. Therefore, the truth of moral claims are relative to culture. There is no objective "truth" in morality.

There are two main objections to the cultural moral relativism.

- Cultural relativism implies that no culturally accepted practices can be wrong.
 - e.g. "Suppose a society was violently anti-Semitic and its leaders set out to destroy the Jews. Cultural Relativism would preclude us from saying that either of these practices was wrong" (Rachels, 25).
 - e.g. If cultural moral relativism were true, it would be impossible to say a practice such as Samurais testing their swords on wayfarers is wrong (Midgley, 27).
- Cultural relativism implies that someone can't sensibly disagree with their own culture.
 - e.g. "Reformers such as Martin Luther King, Jr. have sought to change their societies for the better." But if cultural relativism is true, "the 'reformer' may not challenge the ideals themselves, for those ideals are by definition correct" (Rachels, 27).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can societies be wrong in their moral beliefs?
2. Is moral progress in societies possible?
3. How can we square our intuitions that on one hand we should be tolerant of viewpoints different from our own and respect other cultures, while on the other that we should intervene in behavior that is immoral?