Lecture 2: Moral Relativism

How can we know what is morally right or wrong?

Ethics (**ETHOS** = habit, character): the study of moral principles.

We generally think that some actions are morally good and others are bad. When we make value claims such as "torture is wrong", "all children should get education" or "animal testing must be abandoned", we are saying something *normative*. We say what *ought to* be or *ought not* to be the case.

In ethics, one wants to find universal principles for deciding what is right or wrong, good or bad. But it's not clear where such moral principles can come from. Ourselves? God? Society?

Normative claims are different from *descriptive* claims, which are about *what is* and *what is not*. Example: "many people object to torture", "not all children get education", "animal testing inflicts pain". While we might discover what is true or false from experience (empirically), it is not obvious how we could discover, or arrive at, normative truths.

The Naturalistic Fallacy: David Hume (1711-1776) argued that we cannot infer what ought to be the case from what is the case. Descriptive claims do not entail normative claims: one cannot infer from the fact that education empowers people that we *should* educate people. To do this, we must assume that we ought to empower people, which is itself a normative claim.

Is anything right or wrong, good or bad?

The Sophists argued that there is no objective morals. Through travels and war, they had seen that people from other places lived by different rules. But even if this is true, does that mean that it is also right? This is a big philosophical discussion, to which there is no correct answer.

Today we see the same as the Sophists did: not everyone agrees on what is right or wrong, good or bad. Our moral values seem to differ radically across cultures, generations, societies, religions and times. Sex outside marriage, suicide, divorce, respect for the elders, homosexuality, abortion; these are only some issues where people disagree.

This leaves us with a problem. If moral values differ, how can we claim that something is morally right, wrong, good or bad, in an absolute sense? That would mean that some people have the right to tell others that their values are wrong. But who should decide? And how did they find it out in the first place?

Do we want to say that any action is as morally good as another? Or do we agree on moral questions more often than not? Should it matter if most people already agree, or are moral values entirely independent of existing practices?

Two types of moral relativism

A *moral relativist* rejects universal, objective moral principles. What is considered morally right or wrong is instead relative to (= dependent on) perspectives, history, upbringing, etc.

Moral conventionalism (e.g. cultural relativism) is the view that our moral values depend upon society and its conventions or agreement. Two different societies might therefore have different sets of moral principles and values, and thus also different laws or legal system.

Moral subjectivism (individual relativism) is more radical, saying that moral values and principles vary from one individual to another. We all decide for ourselves what is good or bad.

What follows from relativism? Should we stop forcing our moral values on others? Or is it only a matter of fact that moral values differ?

Descriptive relativist claim: as a fact, people disagree about what is morally right or wrong, good or bad.

Normative relativist claim: we should be tolerant to different moral views and moral relativism is the best approach.

The Sophists' moral relativism: Both normative and descriptive. They found no objectively valid moral rules or principles and we should not try to find any.

Socrates wanted to disprove the normative claim. One thing is that people disagree. But to him, morality and virtues are like facts that can be discovered through reason and dialogue, if we try.

Some problems with moral relativism

A problem with subjectivism: if moral values vary from one person to another, how can we have meaningful moral discussions or conflicts?

3 problems with conventionalism: If moral values vary from one society to another, how can there be value conflicts? Many people in a society belong to more than one culture. Can a person be in a value conflict with oneself?

The reformer's dilemma: if a society defines morality, there is little room for change or reforms. Is it immoral to oppose the values of one's own society or culture?

Tolerance is often given as an argument for moral relativism. But such tolerance is itself a normative principle, saying that it is good to be tolerant. A problem is then if the society does not see tolerance as a virtue.

Attempts to answer the moral relativist challenge

Philosophers after the Sophists have tried to show that moral values are not a subjective or conventional matter. Instead, they have argued that some values are universally and objectively good and bad, right and wrong, *in*dependently of culture, person or society.

All these are examples of *moral absolutism*: something can be morally good across individuals and groups. This makes ethics an objective rather than a subjective or conventional matter.

Virtue ethics (Plato, Aristotle, Philippa Foot, Julia Annas): Morality is linked to our character. Virtues are universal and we all have knowledge of them. Happiness is the ultimate aim for all humans. A virtue is the golden mean between two extremes (rashness – *courage* – cowardice).

Consequentialism (David Hume): Moral principles are grounded in our feeling of empathy. An act is judged on its consequences of producing pleasure or pain within us when we see it.

Utilitarianism (Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Peter Singer): Happiness is the ultimate aim, and the action that brings the greatest happiness is the morally right one.

Duty ethics (Immanuel Kant): We must act out of duty to our own rationality and recognise the intrinsic value of all humans.

Universal human rights (Ruth Macklin): All human beings are essentially the same, therefore human rights are universal. We can explain cultural differences, but not justify them.

Discussion questions

What is moral relativism?

What is a normative claim?

What is a descriptive claim?

What is the difference between these two types of claims?

Would you defend moral relativism as a correct description of reality? Why, or why not?

Would you defend moral relativism as a norm? Why, or why not?

There are some well-known problems with moral relativism. What are they? *Any other problems you could think of?*

Why do you think so many philosophers have tried to prove that moral relativism is false?

Can you find some examples of the naturalistic fallacy (of deriving 'ought' from 'is'?

A video about cultural moral relativism (conventionalism):

A YouTube video, made by *Thinking About Stuff*
https://youtu.be/Npm-7DiqMqM

Calvin – A descriptive or normative relativist? Comic by Bill Watterson: Calvin & Hobbes

Slide share from SlideServe.com about Hume's naturalistic fallacy, by Baakir Olujimi:

https://www.slideserve.com/baakir/meta-ethics-issue-1-the-problem-of-naturalism

What do you think: how would one accept subjectivist moral relativism within a legal system?

www.vegansidekick.com

As mentioned in the BBC *In Our Time* podcast episode on Relativism, most publications on relativism are from after 1990 and are typically called 'Against Relativism' (podcast link: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p003hyc8)
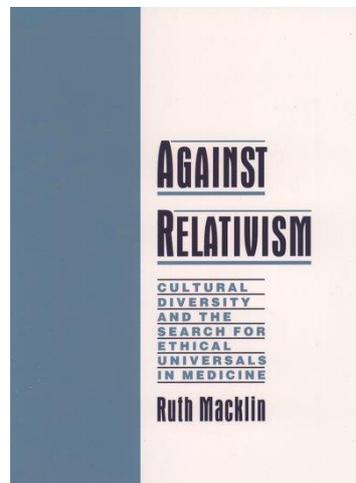
Philosopher Ruth Macklin is professor of bioethics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Yeshiva University. She is adviser to the World Health Organization and an elected member of the National Academy of Medicine. She is author of the book *Against Relativism* (1999).