

2. ETHICAL RELATIVISM

1) Introduction

- i) Examples: missionaries imposing their values on tribal cultures
- ii) Ethnocentrism: the prejudicial view that interprets all of reality through the eyes of one's own cultural beliefs and values
- iii) Moral objectivism: there are universal moral principles, valid for all people and social environments
- iv) Ethical nihilism: no valid moral principles exist, that morality is a complete fiction
- v) Two kinds of ethical relativism
 - (a) Subjective Ethical Relativism (subjectivism): all moral principles are justified by virtue of their acceptance by an individual agent him or herself
 - (b) Conventional ethical relativism (conventionalism): all moral principles are justified by virtue of their cultural acceptance

2) Subjective Ethical Relativism (Subjectivism)

- i) Moral judgments are person-relative
- ii) Criticism: notions of good and bad cease to have interpersonal evaluative meaning

3) Conventional Ethical Relativism (Conventionalism)

- i) The diversity and dependency theses
 - (a) Diversity Thesis: What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society, so there are no universal moral standards held by all societies
 - 1. Anthropological contention, also called "cultural relativism"
 - (b) Dependency Thesis: Whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he or she belongs
- ii) Argument for intercultural tolerance (anthropologist Melville Herskovits)
 - (a) The argument
 - 1. If morality is relative to its culture, then there is no independent basis for criticizing the morality of any other culture but one's own
 - 2. If there is no independent way of criticizing any other culture, then we ought to be tolerant of the moralities of other cultures
 - 3. Morality is relative to its culture
 - 4. Therefore, we ought to be tolerant of the moralities of other cultures
 - (b) Criticisms of the argument for tolerance
 - 1. Tolerance is a value that some societies could adopt, and others reject

4) Criticisms of Conventional Ethical Relativism

- i) Undermines important values
 - (a) Can't criticize anyone who espouses heinous principles (Hitler's genocidal actions)
 - (b) Moral reformers are always wrong (civil disobedience isn't justifiable)
 - (c) Unless we have an independent moral basis for law, it is hard to see why we have any general duty to obey it
- ii) Leads to Subjectivism
 - (a) Problem: since we are members of different subcultures, we can be morally right and wrong at the same time (e.g., a Catholic having a legal abortion in the US)

- (b) Relativists might reply that we can choose which subgroup to follow; however, this collapses into subjectivism since individuals would essentially be creating their own values by selectively choosing their subgroup
- iii) Moral diversity is exaggerated
 - (a) There are some core moral values that we see throughout the world (O.E. Wilson, rejection of the diversity thesis)
 - (b) e.g., duties of restitution and reciprocity, regulations on sexual behavior, obligations of parents to children, a no-unnecessary harm principle, and a sense that the good people should flourish and the guilty people should suffer
- iv) Weak dependency does not imply relativism
 - (a) Two dependency theses
 - 1. Weak view: the application of moral principles depends on one's culture
 - 2. Strong view: the moral principles themselves depend on one's culture
 - (b) The non-relativist can accept the weak view
 - (c) Relativists need the strong view, which is difficult to prove since it requires ruling out all rival sources of substantive moral principles
- v) The indeterminacy of translation (Quine)
 - (a) Languages are often so fundamentally different from each other that we cannot accurately translate concepts from one to another; this seems to imply that each society's moral principles depend upon its unique linguistically-grounded culture
 - (b) Criticism: we do learn foreign languages and learn to translate across linguistic frameworks