

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