



A Critique of Moral Relativism

Chinedu Ifeakor

Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

*Correspondent Author: cs.ifeakor@uniz.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This paper makes a critique of moral relativism. There are currently valid, objective reasons to choose one culture's moral standards over another. Societies make moral choices based on their unique beliefs, customs, and practises. As a result of that, the researcher deems it fit to adopt an expository method to carry out this work. The essence of this is to explore and examine its social consequences. The researcher concludes by saying that moral values should not be restricted to absolutism or relativism, but rather, the two approaches should be ascertained.

Keywords: morality; moral values; norms; tradition; culture; moral relativism; absolutism.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is highly observed that there have always been occurrences of dilemmas on moral value based on absolutism and relativism (Firth, 1952). Certain actions done by men are considered worthy or unworthy based on the two basic approaches to morality called moral absolutism and moral relativism.

According to Forsyth (1992), moral absolutism is the ethical belief that there are absolute standards against which moral questions can be judged and that certain actions are right or wrong, regardless of the context of the act. Thus, actions are inherently moral or immoral, regardless of the beliefs and goals of the individual, society, or culture that engages in them. It holds that morals are inherent in the laws of the universe, the nature of humanity, the will of God, and other fundamental sources. On the other hand, West (2009), moral relativism is the idea that there is no universal or absolute set of moral principles. That is to say, moral values or moral judgements are based on the various norms of different people (the culture of any given society). Furthermore, Richard (2004) indicates that relativism is a concept that is used to classify issues according to their views or ideologies.

Therefore, moral relativism is the opinion that universal moral principles are either not possible or always inexistent; that moral principles are totally conditional upon culture or the individual; that moral judgement and behaviour are amenable to local

(Sarkissian, 2011), immoral motivations; that moral explanations are subjective; that moral values are merely "personal preferences; that moral norms are merely local practises; and that moral perspectives, like preferences, are incontestable (Syed & Van Buren, 2014).

These definitions do not entirely coincide in sense, but they all refer to the same phenomenon. The purpose of this article is to critique the moral sense that accepts moral relativism.

2. TYPES OF MORAL RELATIVISM

Moral relativism can be understood in several ways. In some universities certain dressing codes is not allowed. For example, in the Nnamdi Azikiwe University precisely they accept and reject certain dressings because they took it to be their moral rules. But in some other schools it is allowed. It will not be regarded as something that is immoral. Nevertheless, below are types of moral relativism:

1. **Descriptive moral relativism:** also known as cultural relativism, says that moral standards are culturally defined, which is generally true (Tesón, 1984). A few principles, like honesty and respect, may indeed seem to be practically universal, but when people look at moral standards around the world between cultures, many distinctions are evident (Umotong, et al., 2018). For example, to some part of Igbo

culture; precisely in Nsukka if an elder is quarreling to you, you refused to be looking at him eye ball to eyeball, it shows respect. But if you gazed your eye to him, put your hands inside pocket, it depicts disrespect.

2. **Meta-ethical:** Moral relativism asserts that there are no indubitable reasons to favor one culture's moral standards over another (Jhingran,2001). Societies base their moral decisions on their particular set of values, traditions, and practices. People actually have a tendency to think that the moral standards that are "correct" are those that are prevalent in their own culture.

For instance, Odo & Asogwa, (2022) indicated that in Enugu Ezike in Nsukka of Enugu State, believes that any married woman that has sexual intercourse with somebody is doomed to run mad and will die. And if his husband being aware of his wife's act went and eats her cooked food; he will also die. But if he is not aware of her act, it will affect his first son. Until certain cleansing rituals are done to appease the gods of the land.

3. **Normative Moral relativism:** given that there are no universal moral standards, normative moral relativism holds that all nations should tolerate each other's diverse moral norms. But the majority of philosophers disagree (Quintelier & Fessler, 2012). For instance, just because bribery is acceptable in some cultures does not indicate that it is not acceptable in others.

3. A CRITIQUE OF MORAL RELATIVISM

A criticism in philosophy is the expression of bounds: the subjecting of a phenomenon to a rigorous investigation of its scope, operational field, function in its field, and distinction from other phenomena and operational results (Tribe, 1997). In general, moral relativism ought to stand up most effective in a way of life wherein the person moral sense is the very last, if not the first, arbiter of moral judgment.

3.1 Opinion Varieties

The idea that morality is subjective to the individual or culture is known as moral relativism (Lewis & Unerman, 1999). This implies that morality or

immorality depends on an individual's or a culture's beliefs and ideals. While moral relativism has some benefits, such as promoting tolerance and cultural diversity, it also has some significant downsides (Macklin, 1998). The possibility of a lack of moral accountability is one of the primary objections to moral relativism (Velasquez,2003). It is impossible to determine whether another person's behaviors are right or immoral if morality is relative. Lack of a common moral code to evaluate individuals by can result in a situation where they are not held accountable for their conduct.

This implies that people's ideology differs. When we talk about the issues of morality, there are many different ways to define what is morally good as there is many different ways to define what is morally wrong. Here, it shows that to be morally good has many different factors. This is because what may be considered to be morally good by one person can be judged by another person to be morally wrong. A person's attitude can be influenced by a wide range of social circumstances. A person's environment can cause someone to trust in a certain way. Also, the attitudes of humans around them may cause them to have certain attitudes. To be morally good is to act in a certain way that you may feel comfortable and right with. Other people around you may see your actions and say that you are doing something that is acceptable in our society.

A person who commits a crime will be seen as morally wrong because of what they did, which was against social norms. A person must decide that what they are doing is morally right and proper in order to be morally good. Additionally, society establishes moral standards that everyone must go by to avoid being viewed as unacceptable and wrong. Moral relativism is also criticized for perhaps impeding moral advancement (Ignatius et al., 2022). It is hard to advance toward a better moral system if morality is relative (Jamieson, 2002). As a result of that, Nickel (2012) noticed that when there is no single, universal norm of morality to aspire to; this can result in moral evolution coming to a standstill. Last but not least, moral relativism can result in a lack of moral coherence. It is impossible to develop a moral code that is consistent if morality is relative. As there is no single, accepted definition of morality, making moral decisions can become difficult and inconsistent.

Overall, moral relativism has some benefits, such as promoting tolerance and cultural diversity (Lozano & Escrich, 2017). It also has several significant

flaws, like a lack of moral responsibility, advancement, and consistency. Consequently, it is crucial to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of moral relativism before embracing it as a normative framework.

3.2 Universal Affirmation Controversies

Moral relativism insinuate condemns over universal principles as morally wrong and thus ascribes goodness to itself; but according to itself, it cannot be universally good (Spinello, 2006).

3.2.1 Existential induction

There cannot be moral relativism without man and his society. Note of worthy, moral standards for the relativist are culturally arbitrary or idiosyncratic which may be changed arbitrarily or idiosyncratically. Change becomes an insoluble moral problem. That is why Leo Struass (1989, p. 53) points out that, "Absolutely each person either wants to maintain things as they are or wants to change them. When desiring to maintain, we wish to prevent change to the worse; when desiring to change, we wish to bring about something better. All action is therefore guided by some idea of better or worse"

3.2.2 Moral indifference

Let's consider this, if moral relativism should be uphold at the ultimate, then it would be a matter of moral indifference whether or not a person believes in moral relativism; in other words, the relativist should not care whether anyone believes him. If moral relativism is false, then no one should believe it (Harman, 1978).

Hence, if the proponent of moral relativism attempts to persuade anyone, either he is going against the grain of his own argument (and thus does not actually believe it), or everyone else should pay no attention to him. Thus the dilemma: if any absolutely each person argues in favor of moral relativism, he's either irrational or irrelevant. Hence the morally rational person dismisses moral relativism immediately.

4. EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

From the ongoing, one may be tempted to say that the emergency of moral relativism is egocentrism of man. Man could take his attitude because he discovers the plurality of moralities. In pre-modern societies, moral codes were indistinguishable from the social mores and the laws; in modern societies, they co-exist in the same society and are partially sharing a

boundary (Wuthnow, et al., 2010). But the Greek historians, playwrights, and philosophers had already made the discovery of the diversity of moralities. In fact, this discovery was precisely the stimulus to look intellectually for universals in morality.

Second, because he confuses sense-variability with moral variability, one might adopt a relativist viewpoint. That is, he does not understand that the pre-moral meaning of an action which may differ according to culture, and thus the moral sense of the action would differ.

Take a profound issue, like homicide: murder is universally prohibited, but which homicides count as murder may differ according to culture. Or incest, which is always forbidden but has different definitions of what constitutes a relative. Or sharing one's resources: it is everywhere prescribed; but with whom, what, and under what circumstances are variable. The same, with the necessary modifications, goes for divorce, torture, age of sexual consent, homosexuality, the extent of negligence, aggression, property, cannibalism the relation between religion and morality, the connection between morality and the law, or the use of punishments.

Different cultures can also additionally properly share a (universal) moral principle, but judgments upon a concrete action may differ because of the pre-moral sense of it. The relativist here is naive about cultures.

Finally, a person may adopt a relativist mindset as a result of school guidance that either positively encouraged them or negatively discouraged them from adhering to absolute norms when they were younger. The public school teacher may properly have taught that whatever "values" one chooses for oneself is ipso facto "right."

Despite the forgoing critique of moral relativism, it is important to note and draw some conclusions that moral values should not be restricted to absolutism nor relativism rather the two approaches should be ascertained. And it is also recommended to uphold the assertion of Odo's⁷ views "the weightiest way to judge whether an action is morally good or bad should be strictly centered on golden rule; do to others what you want them to do to you". For example, my rationality is informed also by the precepts of my faith as truth, so while it might be rational / morally justified to hang another human being according to the law of the land, my faith says that the Almighty God created life and only he has the right to take it back.

REFERENCES

- Firth, R. (1952). Ethical absolutism and the ideal observer. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 12(3), 317-345.
- Forsyth, D. R. (1992). Judging the morality of business practices: The influence of personal moral philosophies. *Journal of business Ethics*, 11, 461-470.
- Harman, G. (1978). What is moral relativism?. In *Values and Morals: Essays in Honor of William Frankena, Charles Stevenson, and Richard Brandt* (pp. 143-161). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Ignatius, I., Umotong, I., & Dennis, O. (2022). Heidegger's notion of truth as Alethia: a critical exposition. *International Journal of Humanities and Innovation (IJHI)*, 5(2), 74-79.
- Jamieson, D. (2002). *Morality's progress: Essays on humans, other animals, and the rest of nature*. Oxford University Press.
- Jhingran, S. (2001). *Ethical relativism and universalism*. Motilal Banarsidass Publisher.
- Lewis, L., & Unerman, J. (1999). Ethical relativism: a reason for differences in corporate social reporting?. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 10(4), 521-547.
- Lozano, J. F., & Escrich, T. (2017). Cultural diversity in business: A critical reflection on the ideology of tolerance. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 142, 679-696.
- Macklin, R. (1998). Ethical relativism in a multicultural society. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 8(1), 1-22.
- Odo, A. I., & Asogwa, E. (2022). *AQUINAS MORAL PHILOSOPHY: In correcting the ills of Nigerian Educational system*. Aikeno Global book Publishing Company.
- Quintelier, K. J., & Fessler, D. M. (2012). Varying versions of moral relativism: The philosophy and psychology of normative relativism. *Biology & Philosophy*, 27, 95-113.
- Richard, M. (2004). Contextualism and relativism. *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 119(1/2), 215-242.
- Sarkissian, H., Park, J., Tien, D., Wright, J. C., & Knobe, J. (2011). Folk moral relativism. *Mind & Language*, 26(4), 482-505.
- Spinello, R. A. (2006). *The Genius of John Paul II: The Great Pope's Moral Wisdom*. Sheed & Ward.
- Strauss, L. (1989). *The rebirth of classical political rationalism: An introduction to the thought of Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press.
- Syed, J., & Van Buren, H. J. (2014). Global business norms and Islamic views of women's employment. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 24(2), 251-276.
- Tesón, F. R. (1984). International human rights and cultural relativism. *Va. j. Int'l L.*, 25, 869.
- Tribe, J. (1997). The indiscipline of tourism. *Annals of tourism research*, 24(3), 638-657.
- Umotong, I., & Dennis, O. (2018). An Expository Analysis of Martin Heidegger's Quest for The Meaning of Being. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4(1).
- Velasquez, M. (2003). Debunking corporate moral responsibility. *Business ethics quarterly*, 13(4), 531-562.
- West, A. (2009). Corporate governance convergence and moral relativism. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 17(1), 107-119.
- Wuthnow, R., Hunter, J. D., Bergesen, A. J., & Kurzweil, E. (2010). *Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas* (Vol. 5). Routledge.