

24/25 Comment: Very good, but I am uncertain if you answered the final question.

Week 1 Discussion: Is it Right to be a Relativist?

Required Resources

Read/review the following resources for this activity:

- Textbook: Chapter 1, 2
- Lesson
- Minimum of 1 scholarly source (in addition to the textbook)

Initial Post Instructions

The study of ethics and philosophy is one that brings many different kinds of "thinkers" together. One person's philosophy on ethics is another person's philosophy on evil. We will be working this term on constructing personal ethical bases and understanding how ethical codes (both personal and professional) are created and followed.

To start us thinking about the different areas of philosophy and ethics, and how we fit into the different molds or world views, let's imagine the following scenario:

It is 2019. The federal law banning female circumcision is still under appeal in the courts. You are a nurse assisting a plastic surgeon at a local hospital. The plastic surgeon comes from a country where they practice "female circumcision". This practice is also sometimes called "female genital mutilation".

You are not a member of the doctor's culture, but reside in a state where this practice is still legal. The plastic surgeon has agreed to perform this practice on a young girl, the daughter of a friend of the surgeon. The friend has authorized the procedure. The girl only knows this is a custom. You did not know that today you would be asked to assist in this procedure. You can refuse to participate (your job may be on the line in the future due to that decision). Or, you can assist the surgeon. What ought you to do? We now want to examine the ethical issues involved. To do this, let's look at the role of relativism, moral truths, and other issues.

Initial Post Instructions

For the initial post, address the following questions:

- What would a subjective moral relativist say about what this doctor is doing? Do you agree with the subjective moral relativist? Why or why not?
- Examine what a cultural moral relativist would say here. Do you agree with the cultural relativist? Why or why not?
- Name and evaluate general criticisms of cultural relativism as being the wrong moral approach.
- Is there an objective moral truth about any of the possible actions by the nurse and/or doctor in this case? Why or why not?

Hello Class & Professor,

First, how do we judge his actions? We must look at all the details available to judge fairly (Ruggiero, 2012). A subjective moral relativist would question why does the girl not get to decide whether to or not perform the medical procedure? Even though, a subjective moral relativist would agree that the doctor does not need to justify his participation in the procedure. A cultural moral relativist would agree on the performance of this procedure. Some critics for cultural moral relativism would be the lack of clarity about the contribution that it brings to all members of society, as well as the fact that it is not objective. I do not consider morals to be objective because they are based on the capacity to systematize events as rightful or wrongful (Wreen, 2018).

Why? A subjective moral relativist would most likely highlight the reality that every individual is their moral judgment and has the choice to decide what moral laws to follow (Wreen, 2018). Therefore, this type of relativist might question why that girl is not the one deciding whether to perform this procedure or not, since, at the time, she is only being told to follow the social and moral norms of external individuals (Wreen, 2018). Nevertheless, such relativist would also claim that, from the doctor's position, he is not in the obligation to justify his reason to agree to this procedure, because according to subjective moral relativism, one's perspective of what is right or wrong is equally valid as anyone else's (Ruggiero, 2012). I do not fully agree with this perspective, since I think this type of medical procedure to a minor must be justified and should not only depend on moral decisions. Additionally, to accept all human beliefs as morally valid is an error, limitations should exist, such as the ability to make decisions, the impact such decision has on others, etc. (Ruggiero, 2012).

Furthermore, a cultural moral relativist would support the decision taken regarding the procedure, since the individuals that follow this vision believe that every decision that is most related to the cultural boundaries and mandates of a population, is, therefore, the most morally correct decision (Ruggiero, 2012). Even if considering that all cultural perspectives are equally valid. I cannot entirely agree with this moral position either since I believe traditions and history can lead to cultural normative. Such behavior can have a consequential influence on an individual's life, and for that reason, should not be obligatory, unless justifications exist that differ from morals.

The most common criticisms made towards cultural moral relativism are: Cultural moral relativism imposes its authority as valid when based on traditions and social factors that have not proven to be relevant in terms of their functionality and utility to all members of that society, as well as the respect to human rights, among other necessary factors when judging something like "correct" or "incorrect" (Ruggiero, 2012).

- As much as nations can have a sense of respect for all existing cultures, there must be other reasons to catalog something as more "correct" or "incorrect" that does not relate to any culture, because they are all different, and this makes it very difficult to define an objective and also logical base of norms (Ruggiero, 2012).

Ultimately, I do not consider there is an objective moral truth that can be implemented to evaluate this situation, because they would all end up being choices that cannot be entirely justified by an objective vision, since morality is precisely based on an individual's capacity to discriminate between what is right and wrong, and therefore, this will always be linked to

personal representations of what that is.

References:

Ruggiero, V. R. (2012). *Thinking critically about ethical issues*. McGraw-Hill.

Wreen, M. (2018). What Is Moral Relativism? *Philosophy*, 93(3), 337–354.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819117000614>

Hello Haley,

Thank you for your response and questions! I'm going to do my best here to attempt to answer them to the best of my ability.

How do you personally feel about cultural relativism? I personally feel that the world is the way it is because of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism wrongly claims that each culture has its own distinct but equally valid mode of perception, thought, and choice (Merlo & Pravato, 2020). The opposite idea that moral truth is universal and objective, contends there is no such thing as absolute right and wrong. Overall, there is only right and wrong as specified by the moral code of each society. (Merlo & Pravato, 2020)

Cultural relativism seems almost like its own personal law. If this is true, how do several cultures inhabit one country, such as the United States, and abide by the same laws? Although cultural relativism seems like its own law, I wouldn't say it is. The mistaken idea that there are no objective standards by which our society can be judged because each culture is entitled to its own beliefs and accepted practices (Mitropoulos, 2017).

How would a cultural relativist respond to this? At what point should we put culture to the side so that some sort of law can prevail?

According to cultural relativism, we cannot object to Hitler and Nazism, Mayan infant sacrifice, China's massacre of students in Tiananmen Square, genital mutilation (i.e., female circumcision) of young girls in Africa, and so on, because each of these practices is justified by the worldview within which it exists (Mitropoulos, 2017). Nor could we contend that one culture is superior to another culture. Different societies have different moral codes, some values are still shared (Mitropoulos, 2017). When we leave home and cross our nation's boundaries, moral clarity often blurs. However, I believe there are limits to cultural relativism such as human rights, freedom, and justice. We are taught to respect other cultures and traditions.

I hope this helps with some clarification.

Thank you,

References:

Merlo, G., & Pravato, G. (2020). Relativism, realism, and subjective facts. *Synthese*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02562-x>

Mitropoulos, A. (2017). Cultural Relativism, Cultural Difference. *OSF Preprints*

<https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/xpbv5>