

Cultural Relativism

2.9.2009

Daniel von Wachter
<http://von-wachter.de>

Info

- n Web page online! <http://von-wachter.de/lv/09-2-ethics/ethics2.htm> .
 - n Find the task for the next session!
- n Read also
 - n <http://von-wachter.de/lehre/writing.htm>
on how to write an article and on the criteria for marking.
 - n <http://tips.von-wachter.de>
- n Do the excercises at:
<http://www.jcu.edu/philosophy/gensler/exercise.htm>

What is the claim of cultural relativism?

- n An action is good if, and only if, it is approved by society.
 - n This can mean: “Good” means “socially approved”. Can it mean something else?
 - n This entails: There are no objective moral truths, i.e. ones which are true independent of whether somebody believes or approves of this. “Wrong” is a relative term.
 - n NB. On this view there are true moral statements.
 - n Distinguish between general and singular moral statements.

Student's definition 1

- n Cultural Relativism claims that "good" and "evil", "right" and "wrong", etc, change from culture to culture in the way something is "good" in a particular society, if that particular society approves of that something. In an inverse way, if a society approves of something, that something is good.
 - n First sentence unclear. What does "'Good' change" mean? The meaning changes?

Student's definition 2

- n Cultural relativism is a theory that believes that judgments of what are 'good' or 'bad' are chosen by following the social conventions of society.
 - n This may be true even if CR is false.

Student's definition 3

- n Cultural Relativism (CR) is a concept where the majority's values and concepts are accepted.
 - n concept \neq view
 - n Accepted by whom? Everyone?
 - n This may be true even if CR is false.

Student's definition 4

- n The claim of cultural relativism is that the moral principles are made by the society; therefore, we ought to do what is socially approved.
 - n What is meant by 'moral principles'? Moral beliefs or moral facts?
 - n Why 'therefore'?

Student's definition 5

- n Cultural relativism is a theory that believes that what is 'good' or 'bad' are chosen relative to culture.

Get the definition right!

- n Distinguish “the belief that X is wrong” from “X is wrong”!!!
- n To define a view you have to state not only an entailment of it but the whole view!

Distinguish views from facts

- n What does mean: „Morality differs in every society?“
 1. In different societies there are different moral views.
 2. In different societies different things are obligatory.
- n Aren't there also different moral views within one society?

General versus singular moral statements

- n A general moral statement: Killing is wrong.
- n A singular moral statement: Moses' killing Ramses was wrong.
- n Distinguish from: A life is always in itself supremely valuable.

Duties, rights, guilt

- n What is a (singular) duty? (also “obligation”)
- n What is a right? Distinguish:
 - n The action is permissible for him.
 - n He has a right to demand it.
- n Are there duties which are not duties to someone?
- n Are there right to demand which do not correspond to somebody's duties.
- n Failure to fulfill a duty creates guilt.
- n Guilt is different from feeling of guilt. (Contra Freud)

One Alternative: Ethical Objectivism

- n Also called 'intuitionism'.
 - n What is good is at least sometimes independent of what somebody (e.g. your boss, your government, your society) says.
- n There are objective and irreducible moral facts.
 - n Sometimes it is something to be discovered that one of the possible actions is obligatory.
 - n That an action is obligatory does not consist in something else, e.g. that some people desire it or that someone has commanded it.
 - n Moral Realism: There are true singular moral statements.
 - n Note: one can hold that there are true moral statements but assume that they (or the facts) are reducible to other things.

The main alternatives to CR

- n Ethical objectivism
- n Subjectivism: "X is wrong" means "I do not like X"
- n Emotivism (non-cognitivism): "X is wrong" is neither true nor false, it is just an expression of feeling.
- n Nihilism (e.g. Mackie): There are no moral facts. All moral statements are false.
- n Ethical naturalism: There are true moral statements but they (or the facts) are reducible. They consist in something else, e.g. desires.
- n For this see: M. Huemer: Ethical Intuitionism, 6f.

Is disagreement evidence for CR?

- n How much disagreement is there?
- n Does CR explain the disagreement?
- n If CR were false, would there be no disagreement?
 - n Is there no disagreement about facts?
 - n Isn't there disagreement about most facts?
 - n How can disagreement about non-moral facts be explained? How can disagreement about moral facts be explained?

Possible reasons for CR

- n Cultures differ in their views about morality.
 - n Is this a reason against or for CR?
- n „Normality is culturally defined. An adult is shaped to the drives and standards of these cultures“
 - n Does this support or even entail CR?
- n Moral disagreements cannot be resolved.
 - n Is this true?
 - n Do those who are in a moral disagreement, believe that „good“ means „socially approved“?

How to evaluate evidence

- n Example: fingerprints on a safe.
 - n H: The cook is the thief. I: the fingerprints.
 - n How strong does I support H? This depends mainly on
 - n $P(I/H)$
 - n $P(I/\sim H)$
- n Apply this to moral disagreement as evidence for CR.
 - n NB. One version of $\sim H$ is ethical objectivism. Wie gut kann er das Indiz erklären?

The proper structure of an objection

- n Find some claim about which you agree with the opponent
- n Derive from this that you are right and the opponent is wrong.

Properly phrase an objection against CR

- n Sometimes we believe that society demands something which it has no right to demand or which is even evil.
- n ...

Does CR promote tolerance?

- n Should this mean that the belief in CR promotes intolerance?
- n What is tolerance?
- n Does objectivism promote 'intolerance'?

Objections against CR

- n The following are premises which can be used for arguments against CR. Formulate the arguments.
 - n One can believe that the customs and/or moral views of one's society are wrong.
 - n "X is wrong" and "X is approved by society" are not contradictory.
 - n What does one mean by „obligatory“?
 - n What is „society“? Which one is the relevant group? There are disagreements within a society.

Objections against CR

- n If one society does A, or approves of it, and another one does not do it, is there not the question which one behaves better? Is there not sometimes a true answer?
- n Also our conviction that the Earth is spherical is a product of society.

Gensler: Logical Reasoning (ECI, 3)

Ruth Benedict: Defending Cultural Relativism (ECR, 43-49)

Gensler & Tomenko:

Moral Subjectivism

Info

- n Don't forget that there will be a half term test!

Moral Subjectivism

- n „X is good“ means „I like X“
- n Are the following the same?
 - n „X is good“ means „I like X“
 - n X is good if and only if Y likes X

Distinguish

- n Distinguish MS from emotivism (ECI ch. 5)
 - n According to MS there are true moral statements.
 - n Is this what people who consider themselves subjectivists have in mind? Are there many holding this view?
 - n Distinguish it from Mackie's position which he calls subjectivism
 - n Remember the distinction between general and singular moral statements!

Moral subjectivism

- n What does “I like” mean?
 - n Inclination or evaluation or both?
- n Does MS entail that there are no objective moral facts?

The form of an argument or objection

- n 1. Reductio ad absurdum:
 - n Your view has the consequence X
 - n X clearly is false.
 - n Therefore your view is false.
- n Formulate the objection fully: "It follows from MS that ... But Therefore MS is false."

- n 2. An argument from a shared premise:
 - n It seems that Y is true.
 - n If Y is true then Z is true.
 - n Z contradicts your view.
 - n Therefore, your view is false.

Objections against MS

- n There is no contradiction between 'I like X' and 'X is wrong/bad'.
 - n How about 'I do not like X' and 'X is good'?
- n Change of feelings according to MS is a change of moral opinion.
- n Change of moral opinions according to MS is only a change of feelings. That is not what the subject means.
- n In moral disagreement people believe to have no just different feelings.
- n Can one give reasons for changing a moral view?

David Hume

n Hume's assumptions:

- n Every action is motivated by a desire.
- n Fact-value divide: There are no values in the world. "Matters of fact" are never about values. ("Values are subjective.")
- n Reason [beliefs] is about how the world is, and never about what you ought to do.
- n Therefore, reason alone (i.e. without desires) cannot motivate an action.
- n Passions are never in agreement or disagreement with matters of fact (because there are no values in the world)

n Reason can influence our conduct in two ways:

1. Reason can inform us of the existence of a certain thing for which then a desire arises.
2. Reason can tell us how we can fulfil a desire.

n [For Hume, it cannot influence our conduct by discovering a value or a duty.]

n "Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."

n Beliefs cannot motivate.

n "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger."

A Humean line of thought

- n The distinction between moral good and evil has an influence on our actions.
- n If it were made by reason, then it would be the object of beliefs.
- n Beliefs cannot motivate. (Because – or therefore – there are no values in the world.)
- n If it were made by reason, then it would not have an influence.
- n Therefore, the distinction between moral good and evil is not made by reason.

Tast for next Monday

- n Summarise Hume's view of morality in 300 – 1000 words. Write it down as if it were your position. But do not just use Hume's words, say it in your own words.
- n Have read the text by Nagel.
- n Bring the text by Hume and the one by Nagel and your summary.

Objections to Hume

- n Some beliefs can motivate actions. Namely beliefs about what one ought to do.
- n Sometimes we have conflicting desires but no duty to prefer one of them. H cannot distinguish these cases from cases of desires and conflicting duties.
- n An agent following a desire is passive. An agent acting on a reason is active.



- n If in two situations there are different duties, then there is a difference in the non-moral properties.
- n False: If in S1 there is duty D because of the non-moral facts A,B,C,D, then in every situation equal in A,B,C,D there is a duty equal to D.
 - n This is false because there can be an additional non-moral fact L because of which D does not obtain.
- n Whenever there is a duty D, there is a set of non-moral facts because of which D obtains.