An Approach to Relativism

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The issue of moral relativism is very troublesome for those of us who teach ethics. Many of our students come to the classes we teach firmly convinced that “morality is relative” and that, therefore, it is senseless to try to seek answers to moral questions or attempt to discuss them rationally. We face a strange situation in that many of our students come into our classes with the firm, if not always clearly articulated, belief that there is no point in trying to do what we (and the authors we read) are attempting to do—rationally assess, criticize, and justify moral beliefs. It is essential to address the issue of relativism in most ethics courses. Unfortunately, most classic historical texts suitable for classroom use, e.g., Mill’s *Utilitarianism* and Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, don’t address the issue of relativism. Most contemporary books and journal articles on moral relativism (including some of the articles reprinted in introductory anthologies) are too difficult and technical for most undergraduate courses. Teachers who want students to do readings on relativism are often compelled to use one of a number of introductory ethics textbooks that include chapters on relativism. Some of these books are well done. But it is desirable to have other options. There should be a place in our profession for articles written at the same level and addressed to the same audience, as textbooks. This journal should be a place for such work to be published and read, and this paper is an attempt to contribute to that end. I have developed a lengthy class handout on moral relativism that I and others have used with some success. I present this handout below.

Two brief prefatory comments about the handout. 1) I distinguish between many different versions of moral relativism. This is important, because people mean many different things when they say that “morality is relative.” Most of us find, on examination, that we accept certain versions of moral relativism, but reject others. I argue that some versions of moral relativism are clearly true and others clearly false. The answer to the question “is moral relativism true?” can’t be a simple “yes” or “no.” We need to make clear which version of relativism we are talking about. 2) I discuss the historical example of the Nazi Holocaust at considerable length and argue that it is objectively true that what the Nazis did was wrong. This example refutes extreme versions of moral relativism and moral skepticism according to which no moral judgments are objectively true and no moral judgments can be rationally justified. The best way to defend the view that it is possible to rationally justify moral judgments is by example—to give a rational justification of certain moral judgments.

(Moral Relativism)

Many people claim that morality and moral standards are “relative,” but what they mean when they say this is often unclear. Sections I–IV explain some of the major theories that fall under the general heading of “moral relativism.” Following at least one standard terminology, I distinguish between “cultural relativism,” “situational relativism,” “normative relativism,” “metaethical relativism” and “moral skepticism.” The terminological preliminaries are rather long and involved: But these preliminaries (tedious as they may be) are necessary. 1) When we look at the different ways of formulating “moral relativism” we see that there are, in fact, many different things people mean when they claim that morality is “relative.” Many of us find, on examination, that we endorse some versions of relativism and reject others. I venture to predict that the great majority of my readers will find that this is the case. I argue that “situational relativism” and some versions of “cultural relativism” are clearly true and that “normative relativism” is clearly false. Thus, there is no simple or unequivocal answer to the question “is moral relativism true?” We need to make clear which version of relativism we are talking about. 2) People often claim that important conclusions follow (or would follow) if relativism were true. Some contend that the relativity of moral standards implies that we ought to be tolerant of other people and the beliefs of other societies. Others claim that moral relativism shows that moral judgments aren’t objectively true or correct and that moral issues cannot be rationally debated. These claims can only be assessed with reference to particular versions of moral relativism. Not all versions of relativism warrant the conclusions that are alleged to follow from relativism. At least some versions of ethical relativism are perfectly consistent with the view that ethical judgments are objectively true or false and that they can be rationally justified. Further, as I argue in section V, it’s doubtful that any version of relativism provides unequivocal support for tolerance.
The most important and most difficult philosophical questions about moral relativism concern "metaethical" relativism (MER). MER holds that moral judgments are not objectively true or false: According to MER, standards of truth or correctness for moral judgments are relative to different individuals or different societies so that what is true for one person might not be true for another person. In section IV, I explain MER and distinguish it from other versions of moral relativism. Sections VI–IX examine arguments for and against MER. I discuss the historical example of the Nazi Holocaust at considerable length and argue that it is objectively true that what the Nazis did was morally wrong. This implies that extreme versions of MER and moral skepticism are false—at least some moral judgments are objectively true and can be rationally justified. In section X, I distinguish between MER and what I call "irrationalism." I argue that, even if MER were true, it would not commit us to an "anything goes" kind of irrationalism according to which whatever moral judgments a person accepts are true for her.

**Cultural Relativism**

1. The Definition of Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism (CR) holds that beliefs or opinions about moral issues are relative to different individuals and different societies, i.e., different individuals and different societies accept different moral standards and disagree about the answers to many moral questions. So stated, CR is an empirically testable view and it seems to be clearly true—individuals and societies do sometimes disagree about the answers to particular moral questions. We can also formulate stronger versions of CR such as the following:

There is disagreement between different individuals and different societies about every moral question. (There is no single moral question about which every individual or every society agrees.)

I'm inclined to think that this version of CR is false, but it would take an enormous amount of empirical evidence to either prove or disprove it.

2. Fundamental Disagreement

The fact that two people disagree about the answer to a particular moral question does not imply that they disagree in their basic moral principles (standards). Sometimes people disagree about the answers to moral questions because they disagree about the answers to certain factual questions. For example, suppose that you and I disagree about the morality of imposing capital punishment on people convicted of first-degree murder. You claim that capital punishment is morally permissible, because it deters people from committing murder and thereby saves many innocent lives. I hold that capital punishment is morally wrong because it does not deter anyone from committing murder. Here, we disagree about the following factual questions:

- Does (or would) capital punishment deter potential murders?
- Does (or would) the number of people whose lives would be saved by a system of capital punishment exceed the number of people (or the number of innocent people) who would be executed?

All of this is compatible with our accepting the same basic moral principles. For example, we might both accept the following principle:

It is wrong to kill another human being, unless doing so will result in a net saving of human lives.

Some disagreements about the morality of capital punishment clearly do reflect disagreements about basic moral principles. Some people claim that killing a human being is always wrong, no matter what the consequences. They oppose any use of capital punishment. No conceivable factual evidence about the deterrent value of capital punishment could persuade them that capital punishment is morally permissible; the disagreement between them and those who support capital punishment reflects disagreement about basic moral principles.

3. Some Difficulties in Interpreting Anthropological Evidence

Some moral disagreements between individuals reflect disagreements about fundamental moral principles. But this is compatible with saying that there are some basic moral principles that every society (or every individual) accepts. The extent of fundamental disagreement between different societies is often difficult to determine. When we encounter moral disagreements between different societies it is often difficult to determine whether or not they reflect disagreements about ultimate standards or whether they just reflect factual disagreements. Sometimes very striking disagreements between societies are compatible with agreement about matters of basic principle. Almost all societies hold that it is wrong for children to kill their parents. But the traditional culture of the Figi Islands sanctions a ritual killing of the parents by their children. Not only do the Figi Islanders think it permissible for children to kill their parents, they believe that children have a duty to kill their parents. The disagreement between the Figi Islanders and nearly everyone else on the question of killing one's parents is not a fundamental disagreement or disagreement in principle. This disagreement can be fully explained in terms
of disagreements about questions about what (if anything) happens to human beings after they die. The Figi Islanders believe that the afterlife continues forever or indefinitely, and thus that it constitutes an infinitely greater portion of one’s total existence than one’s earthly life. They also believe that one has a body in the afterlife; the afterlife is not a purely spiritual or incorporeal existence. Christians also believe in an everlasting afterlife and “the resurrection of the body.” The distinctive feature of the Figi Islanders’ religious views is that they believe that the physical condition of one’s body in the afterlife depends on the condition of the body just before the time of one’s death. So, for example, if you die when you are young, vigorous, and physically attractive, then your body will be vigorous and attractive throughout your entire afterlife. On the other hand, if you die while you are old, feeble, senile, unable to control your bodily functions, and racked by pain from arthritis and other afflictions, then you will exist forever in such a condition. Obviously, if such beliefs were true, then it would be very advantageous for people to die while they are relatively young and healthy. The beliefs and practices of the Figi Islanders are perfectly consistent with the belief that children should love their parents and do things that benefit their parents. (It should be stressed that the parents consent to being killed by their children and the act is viewed as an expression of love and respect by the children for their parents.) This case teaches us that it is very difficult to interpret the significance of anthropological data about moral beliefs. Startling differences in practice are not necessarily evidence of fundamental disagreements about basic principles.

Situational Relativism

Situational relativism is the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action is “relative to” the situation in which it occurs or is performed. For example, whether or not it is morally permissible to tell a lie depends on (or is relative to) the situation in which the lie is told. Lying is permissible in some situations, for example, when it is necessary in order to save the life of an innocent person, and wrong in other situations. Or, to take another example, it is permissible to kill another human being in some circumstances, e.g., self-defense, but not others (it is not permissible to randomly kill people we meet on the street). Situational relativism is perfectly consistent with the view that moral judgments are objectively true or false and that there are universally valid standards of right and wrong that hold for everyone. A situational relativist could say that there are universally valid standards of right and wrong and that those standards imply that the rightness or wrongness of acts such as lying and killing depends on the specific circumstances of the act. Most of us think that the rightness or wrongness of an act is determined at least partly by its consequences. Almost all traditional theories of right and wrong are consistent with situational relativism. The only kind of moral theory that is inconsistent with situational relativism is the view that the only valid moral standards are rules such as “lying is always wrong, no matter what” and “killing others is always wrong, no matter what.” I believe that situational relativism is clearly true.

Normative Relativism

Some people claim that we shouldn’t judge other people’s actions by our own moral standards or the standards of our own society—we should judge other people and what they do by reference to their own moral standards or the moral standards of their societies. According to this view, the rightness or wrongness of a person’s actions is relative to his own moral standards or the standards of the society of which he is a member. This view is called “normative relativism” (NR). There are a number of different ways in which normative relativism can be formulated. We might say that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the beliefs or basic moral principles of the agent, i.e., an act is right if and only if the agent believes that it is right (or the act is consistent with the basic moral principles of the agent). I will call this the individual version of normative relativism (NR). Alternatively, we could say that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the beliefs or basic moral principles of the agent’s society, i.e., an act is right if and only if most of the members of the agent’s society believe that it is right (or the act is consistent with the basic moral principles of the agent’s society). I will call this the societal version of NR.

Normative relativism has a number of consequences that are extremely counterintuitive. Among other things, it implies that a person can be justified in performing any act whatever, including acts of murder and torture, etc., provided that his doing so is consistent with his own moral beliefs or basic moral standards (or the beliefs or basic standards of the society of which he is a member). The infamous murderer Charles Manson believed that God commanded him to commit the murders for which he was imprisoned. He believed that it was his moral duty to commit these murders. If the individual version of NR were true, then it would follow not only that what Manson did was right, but that it was his duty; it would have been wrong for him not to have committed the murders. The societal version of NR does not have this consequence; the murders Manson committed were not consistent with the beliefs or basic moral principles of most of
the members of his society. However, the societal version of NR also has many absurd consequences. It implies that no act can possibly be wrong provided that it is consistent with the moral beliefs or the basic moral principles of the agent’s society. Many (perhaps most) human societies have sanctioned the institution of slavery or something like it, e.g., serfdom or a caste system, at times in the past. The societal version of NR implies that there was nothing morally objectionable about the practice of slavery in those many times and places when it was consistent with most people’s moral beliefs or moral principles. It also implies that it makes no sense to object to or dissent from the moral principles of one’s society. Actions, institutions, and policies are guaranteed to be morally right provided that they are in accordance with one’s society’s beliefs (principles). The actions, institutions, and policies in question are morally right just because they are in accordance with the beliefs or principles of one’s society.

A number of well-known anthropologists endorse something very much like the societal version of NR and claim that it is true simply in virtue of the meaning of moral terms. They claim that to say that an act is right/wrong (good/bad) simply means that the agent’s society approves of it. According to William Graham Sumner, “‘immoral’ never means anything but contrary to the mores of time and place.” Ruth Benedict writes:

Mankind has always preferred to say, “It is morally good,” rather than “It is habitual,” and the fact of this preference is matter enough for a critical science of ethics. But historically the two phrases are synonymous. The concept of the normal is properly a variant of the concept of the good. It is that which society has approved. A normal action is one which falls within the limits of expected behavior for a particular society.

This account of the meaning of moral terms is clearly mistaken. “Action X is morally right” cannot simply mean “X is in accordance with the present mores or moral standards of my society.” Such a view would make it impossible for anyone to dissent from the moral code of her own time and place without being inconsistent. According to the theory in question, it is self-contradictory to say that an action or policy that is generally approved of by one’s society is morally wrong. But, throughout history, many people have criticized the moral standards and practices of their own time and place. Such dissent is intelligible. It is not self-contradictory to say that a certain practice is wrong, even though the norms of one’s own society permit or require it. Those individuals who criticized the moral standards of their own time and place by calling for the abolition of slavery were not guilty of self-contradiction.

1. The Definition of MER

Metaethical relativism (MER) can be defined as follows:

MER is the view that moral judgments are not objectively true or false, but only true or false for particular individuals (or societies) and thus that different individuals (or societies) can hold conflicting moral judgments, without any of them being mistaken.

Metaethical relativism is the version of ethical relativism that employs the familiar “true for you” “true for me” terminology. Metaethical relativism is a view about the status of moral judgments. It implies that moral judgments are not objectively true or false but only true or false for particular individuals or particular societies.

According to MER, what is true for one person might not be true for another person. For example, it might be true for you that abortion is always wrong, but true for me that abortion is sometimes permissible. It might be true for me that slavery is wrong, but true for Jefferson Davis that slavery is right. But this terminology is misleading. MER denies that moral judgments are true at all in any ordinary sense of the word “true.” In the ordinary sense of the word “true,” to say that a statement is true is to say that it is true for everyone; anyone who rejects it is mistaken. For example, it is objectively true (true for everyone) that Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States. Anyone who denies this is mistaken. Suppose that you and I disagree about the answer to a question for which we both agree or know that there is an objectively correct answer. For example, suppose that I believe that Leif Eriksson was the first European to reach America and you believe that Christopher Columbus was the first European to reach America. I must say that one of the following is the case: i) your belief is mistaken, ii) my belief is mistaken, or iii) we are both mistaken—perhaps the first European to reach America was someone other than Eriksson or Columbus.

It is important to distinguish between the following:

Extreme metaethical relativism—the view that no moral judgments (about any moral questions) are objectively true/correct or false/incorrect.

Moderate metaethical relativism—the view that i) some moral judgments are objectively true or false (there is an objectively true or correct answer to certain moral questions), and ii) some moral judgments are not objectively true or false (there are some moral questions to which there is no objectively true or correct answer).
2. Metaethical Relativism Contrasted with Moral Skepticism

Metaethical relativism should not be confused with moral skepticism. A moral skeptic is someone who denies that people can know the answers to moral questions. For example, a moral skeptic might say that it is impossible to know whether or not it would be right for Ms. Jones to have an abortion. The skeptic, however, can still say that there is an objectively correct answer to this and other moral questions. The skeptic could hold that it is objectively true or false that it would be permissible for Ms. Jones to have an abortion. All that the skeptic needs to deny is that anyone could ever know whether or not it would be right for Ms. Jones to have an abortion. (Similarly, it is consistent for the person who thinks that it is impossible to know whether or not the first forms of life on earth lived in fresh water to think that it is either objectively true or false that the first forms of life lived in fresh water.) Metaethical relativism is a much more radical view than moral skepticism. The metaethical relativist not only says that we cannot know whether things are good or bad or right or wrong, etc., she denies that there are any moral truths (any objectively correct answers to moral questions) for us to know.

3. A Handy Way to Distinguish Between CR, NR, and MER

Many people have difficulty distinguishing between the three main versions of relativism. There is really no cause for confusion here. The thing to remember is that the three theories are theories about different things; they are not competing or incompatible views. CR is a theory that answers the question “what do we believe about morality?”, and it is a theory about what sorts of beliefs people have about moral questions (or what kinds of moral standards they accept). NR is a theory about what makes actions right or wrong. (It’s the same kind of theory as utilitarianism). MER is a theory which answers the question “are moral judgments objectively true or false?” A theory about the status of moral judgments.

CR says that beliefs about morality are relative to different individuals and different societies.

NR says that the rightness or wrongness of an action is relative to the beliefs or moral standards of the agent or the agent’s society.

MER says that the truth of moral judgments is relative to different individuals or different societies.

Relativism and Tolerance

Many people who accept NR, MER, or moral skepticism are motivated by a desire to be tolerant of the opinions of people who accept different moral standards. Some relativists claim that non-relativists cannot consistently endorse tolerance. To claim to have objective knowledge about moral questions is to make the arrogant assumption that the views of those who disagree with one are mistaken and therefore, not deserving of tolerance or respect. The foregoing argument is seriously mistaken. First, non-relativists and non-skeptics are not thereby committed to being intolerant of the views of others. Second, normative relativists, metaethical relativists, and moral skeptics cannot plausibly explain why we ought to be tolerant of other peoples’ moral beliefs.

1. It is perfectly consistent for a person to respect and tolerate the views of others, even if she regards their views as mistaken. Suppose that I claim to know that x is morally wrong, whereas you believe that x is morally right. It follows that I think that your view is mistaken. But it does not follow that I think that your view is reprehensible, foolish, stupid, or ill-considered. Nor does it follow that I wish to compel you to adopt my view. Consider the analogy with religion. Few, if any, people are “relativists” about religion. Atheists do not say “it’s true for me that God doesn’t exist, but true for theists that God exists.” Atheists hold that theists are mistaken in thinking that God exists. Similarly, theists hold that atheists are mistaken in thinking that God doesn’t exist. In general, the members of any religious sect believe that at least some of the things that non-members believe are false. Lutherans (or those who accept Lutheran doctrines) believe that some of the things that Catholics believe are false, e.g., their beliefs about the authority of the scriptures and transubstantiation. Similarly, Catholics (or at least those who adhere to the doctrines of the church) believe that some of the things that Lutherans believe are false. But, while both Lutherans and Roman Catholics believe that members of the other faith are mistaken about certain things, they can regard each other’s beliefs as worthy of respect and toleration.

In this context, it should be stressed that there are proper limits to tolerance. Short of inciting a crowd to riot, members of our society are free to express any views whatever, regardless of how offensive those views may seem to others. Even members of the American Nazi Party are free to air their views. Many (most?) of us approve of this sort of protection for freedom of expression, but we are not thereby committed to respecting or condoning the views of those who preach
hatred for others. Some views are reprehensible. Some views are foolish and ill-supported. We should not be afraid of saying this for fear of seeming to be intolerant. Present-day Nazis (who are in a position to know what really happened under Hitler) are reprehensible and/or foolish in their beliefs and if unqualified tolerance won’t let us say this, then so much the worse for unqualified tolerance! I believe that Nazis should be permitted to freely express their views. However, it does not follow that they should be permitted to act on their views or carry out their policies.

2. Moral relativists and moral skeptics cannot give an adequate explanation of why we should be tolerant of the views of others or of why intolerance is (usually) morally objectionable.

a) Consider first the normative relativist. What can the normative relativist say against those who are actively intolerant of others? For example, what can the normative relativist say against Nazis who are actively intolerant of others? The individual version of NR implies that there is absolutely nothing morally objectionable about being intolerant of others, provided that this intolerance is consistent with or demanded by one’s moral beliefs or basic moral principles. If I think that I ought to persecute Mormons (or Catholics, or Christians, or atheists, or Jews, or Moslems) and burn their books, then it follows that I should persecute and burn their books. Those who endorse the societal version of NR would have to condone intolerance whenever it is in accordance with the moral beliefs or moral principles of the majority of the members of the society in question. History provides all too many examples of persecution and intolerance supported by the majority of a given society.

b) A metaethical relativist can make the judgment that we ought to be tolerant of those who have religious and ethical beliefs that are opposed to those that we hold. However, unless he rejects extreme MER and is prepared to say that this judgment is objectively true (not just true for him), he must be prepared to add the qualification that this judgment may not be true for others. Consider the following: “It’s true for me that people shouldn’t burn books, but this is not true for the book burners.” This is giving with one hand and taking with the other. In order to make an unambiguous condemnation of those who act intolerantly from principle, one must be willing to assert that at least some of the views of intolerant people are mistaken.

c) A moral skeptic cannot exhort people to be tolerant of others unless he thinks that the view that we ought to be tolerant is (much?) more likely to be true than not. To say “intolerance is wrong, but I have no idea whether or not it’s true that intolerance is wrong” is to say nothing at all.

1. The Argument that MER Is True Because CR Is True

The main argument for MER is very simple. It goes as follows: “Cultural relativism is true, therefore, metaethical relativism is true.” We can formulate the argument more precisely as follows:

1. There is disagreement about the answers to some moral questions (every moral question).

2. If there is disagreement about the answer to a question, then there is no objectively correct (objectively true) answer to that question.

Therefore,

Moderate (extreme) MER is true. (Moderate MER holds that some moral judgments are not objectively true or false; extreme MER holds that no moral judgments are objectively true or false.)

This argument is valid (the conclusion follows from the premises). The weaker version of premise #1 is clearly true—there is disagreement about the answers to some moral questions. But premise #2 is false; mere disagreement about the answer to a question doesn’t prove that there is no objectively correct answer to that question. Suppose that two people disagree about the answer to a clearly defined math problem. There might still be an objectively correct answer to that problem. There is disagreement about whether or not Lee Harvey Oswald fired the shots (or some of the shots) that killed President Kennedy. According to premise #2, it follows that there is no objective fact of the matter. But this is absurd. Either Oswald fired some of the shots that struck President Kennedy or else he did not. This is a matter of objective fact; it may now be impossible for us to know for certain whether or not Oswald fired some of the shots that struck Kennedy, but there is an objective fact of the matter nonetheless.

2. Alternative Versions of the Argument

Here, the metaethical relativist might object that disagreements about “factual” questions cannot be compared to disagreements about moral questions. Disagreements about “factual questions” show that one or both of the parties is mistaken. If we come up with different answers to a math question we would not conclude that there is no objectively correct answer to that question, but only that at least one of us has an incorrect answer. But (the argument continues), morality is different; reasonable people can disagree about moral questions and when reasonable people disagree then there cannot be any objective truth. But this modified argument is also untenable.
Disagreement between competent rational judges does not disprove the existence of objective truth. Competent authorities sometimes disagree about questions for which there are objectively correct answers. For example, mathematicians sometimes disagree about the answers to math problems. Historians sometimes disagree about the answers to historical questions to which there are objectively true answers. The metaethical relativist might persist here and say that disagreements about moral questions are irresolvable. No matter how informed and rational people might be, they would/could still disagree about the answers to ethical questions. Ideally rational and informed people could/would disagree about the answers to all moral questions and disagreement about the answer to a question between ideally rational people shows that there is no objectively true answer to that question.

3. Assessment of the Last Argument and a Complication: Moral Realism

In the case of history and mathematics, most of us assume that there are “facts” or truths that are independent of what anyone thinks or believes. The view that there are facts or truths independent of what we believe (and independent of what we would believe if we were ideally rational) is called “realism.” Realism about history says that there are objective facts about history that are independent of what anyone believes (or would believe if they were rational). For example, it is a fact that Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States during the U.S. Civil War. It is a fact that Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453. I take it that realism about history is true. There are historical facts that are independent of what anyone believes. Disagreement about the answers to certain historical questions is not evidence for relativism about history, i.e., it’s not evidence for the claim that there are no objective facts about those questions. Moral realism is the view that there are “moral facts,” e.g., that torturing animals for “fun” is wrong, that are true independently of the beliefs and attitudes of human beings (even ideally rational human beings). Moral realists hold that the fact that people often disagree about the answers to moral questions does not show that there are no objectively true answers to those questions, but only that some of the parties to those disagreements must be mistaken. Here, one might reply that, even if disagreement between rational people isn’t evidence for MER, it is still evidence for moral skepticism. Even if there are independent moral facts, the fact that rational people disagree about every moral question makes it impossible for us to know what is right and wrong or good and bad.

1. My Strategy for Criticizing Extreme MER and Extreme Moral Skepticism

MER presupposes the falsity of moral realism. The issue of moral realism is terribly complicated. I cannot even begin to do it justice here. But I think that we can make a strong case against extreme MER and extreme moral skepticism (the view that we can’t know the answers to any moral questions) independently of whether moral realism is true. There are some moral judgments that all rational people (or ideally rational people) would agree to. Those moral judgments that all rational or ideally rational people would agree to are objectively true (true for everyone) and we can know that they are true or correct. All rational or ideally rational people would agree that the Nazi Holocaust was wrong.

What are the features of an ideal moral judge? At a minimum, the following characteristics are essential for being an ideal moral judge:

a) Ideal moral judges must be fully informed about the relevant facts.

b) Ideal moral judges must be vividly aware of all relevant information. An ideal moral judge would have to have a vivid understanding of the experiences of other people. If an action causes someone to experience certain kinds of feelings, then knowing what it is like to experience those feelings is relevant to assessing the morality of the action in question. Lack of empathy often constitutes ignorance about relevant matters. For example, if I don’t know (in vivid and exorcising detail) what it feels like to be burned to death, then I lack knowledge which is crucially relevant to assessing the morality of firebombing a city during a war.

[This list of characteristics of an ideal moral judge could probably be expanded. My argument which follows assumes that these are among the features of an ideally rational moral judge.]

2. An Outline of the Argument

All ideally rational moral judges would agree about certain moral questions. All ideally rational moral judges would agree that it was morally wrong for the Nazis to attempt to exterminate the Jewish people (and kill roughly six million of them). Therefore, this judgment is objectively true and we can claim to know that it is true. How do I know this? How do I know that all ideally rational moral judges would agree that it was wrong for the Nazis to kill millions of Jews? The best I can do is show ways in which those who disagree are irrational or ill-informed in some clear way. Only someone who
was irrational or ill-informed would disagree. All reasonable people would agree that it was wrong for the Nazis to attempt to exterminate the Jews (and kill 6 million Jews and roughly an equal number of non-Jews). Only people who have false beliefs, lack vivid awareness of the sufferings of the victims, or who irrationally displace hostility could believe that the Holocaust was morally permissible. (I will argue below that displacing hostility is irrational and that not displacing hostility should be added to the list of features of an ideal moral judge). Before stating my argument, I need to digress and give historical background on the Nazi movement and Holocaust. I want to discuss some of the false beliefs which are part of Nazi ideology and also show why they seemed plausible to many people in the past. I also want to show how many Nazis were not vividly aware of the nature of the suffering they caused others. Himmler sought to minimize the empathy of the perpetrators for their victims—this lack of empathy constituted a willful ignorance of relevant information.

**Historical Background on the Holocaust**

1. Hitler's Belief that Jews Were Responsible for Germany's Defeat in World War I

The Nazi movement endorsed many false and absurd beliefs about the Jewish people. Among other things, the Nazis claimed that Jews were responsible for the Great Depression of the 1930s. (This belief is particularly ridiculous in light of the widespread discrimination against Jews in banking and financial institutions in the U.S. at that time.) Other false beliefs shared by many 19th- and 20th-century anti-Semites were: 1) the belief in a wide-ranging Jewish conspiracy to control the world (the forged document "The Protocols of Elders of Zion" was advanced in support of this view); and 2) the belief that Jews practiced ritual killing of Christian babies and used the blood of these babies in religious ceremonies. [This belief has a contemporary analogue in the claim by certain members of the Nation of Islam that Jewish Doctors (or Jewish Doctors together with South African Doctors) created the AIDS virus and deliberately infect black patients with the virus.] But the most important belief that shaped Hitler's views was his belief that Jews were responsible for Germany's defeat in WWI.

I don't think that we can overestimate the importance of this belief in shaping Hitler's own attitudes and German anti-Semitism during the Nazi era. Hitler was not a rabid anti-Semite until after WWI. Hitler was a frontline soldier during the entire war. He endured the dangers and sufferings of frontline soldiers—he was wounded and gassed. He was extremely proud of his war record—he received the "Iron Cross First Class"—one of the highest awards that a German soldier could receive. (Curiously enough, he received this medal on the strength of the recommendation and special efforts of a Jewish officer.) Hitler was in a military hospital when he learned of the end of the war and Germany's defeat. Learning this news caused him to suffer a nervous breakdown. He was treated by a psychiatrist and, by his own account, he became temporarily blind as a result of learning of Germany's defeat.7

Hitler attributed Germany's defeat to Jewish traitors on the home front. According to him, Germany was not defeated on the battlefield, but rather "stabbed in the back" by its Jewish citizens. This claim seemed plausible to many Germans. It is important to explain at length how this belief (which is demonstrably false and absurd) could have seemed plausible to so many people. I must begin with a (very) brief overview of the history of World War I.

WWI was fought on two main fronts: i) the "Western Front"—the French and the British fought the Germans on a front which ran from the English Channel to Switzerland, and ii) the "Russian Front"—Germany and Austria-Hungary fought against Russia on a huge front running from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. Throughout the first three years of the war (1914–1917) the fighting on the Western Front was stalemate and neither side was able to gain a decisive advantage. Casualties on both sides were very high, but considerably higher for the British and French. On the Eastern Front the Germans inflicted many terrible defeats on the Russians and occupied a great deal of Russian territory. The course of the war changed dramatically in 1917. The U.S. entered the war against Germany; the Bolsheviks (Communists) took over the government in Russia and immediately began negotiating an end to the war with Germany and Austria-Hungary. In early 1918 Germany and Russia signed a peace treaty (the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk). The Germans then moved much of their huge army from Russia to the Western Front, where they would enjoy a temporary advantage before the American Army arrived in strength. (The U.S. had a tiny peacetime army and took over a year to send a large number of troops to France.) Everyone understood that the Germans were playing "beat the clock"—they had to defeat the French and British before America could play an important role in the war.

In the Spring and early Summer of 1918 the Germans launched a successful offensive against the British and French. In July they came very close to Paris and seemed to be on the verge of winning the war. Then very suddenly everything collapsed. The American Army put one million soldiers into the battle and the Germans were outnumbered and outgunned. The morale of the German army collapsed.
The collapse of morale was due to heavy casualties in the Spring/Summer offensives and the cumulative effects of Germany’s total military casualties (7 million!!) and widespread hunger and starvation caused by the British naval blockade which deprived Germany of the imported food it normally depended on.\(^8\)

In August several German generals told the Kaiser (Emperor) that Germany no longer had any hope of winning the war. Then the tide of battle turned very much against the Germans and they suffered many serious defeats. The German Army was driven out of most of the French and Belgian territory that it had occupied since the beginning of the war. On November 9 the Kaiser abdicated the throne and General Ludendorff (who together with Hindenberg commanded the army) had a nervous breakdown and fled to Sweden. Germany was thrown into chaos. There were many mutinies in the navy and a left-wing/marxist revolution. The revolutionary government had the task of ending the war—a task which the monarchists had abandoned. The blame for the harsh peace was shifted to the leftist government. Many of the leaders of this government were Jewish. (This is the small shred of truth in Hitler’s story.)

After the war the German government held a series of hearings about WWI in order to determine why the war had gone so badly for Germany. Many generals were asked to testify in these hearings. Many of the most important Generals (including Hindenberg and Ludendorff) claimed that Germany was not defeated on the battlefield, but rather “stabbed in the back” by left-wing (largely Jewish) traitors on the home front. (“7 million casualties all lost in vain because of these traitors!”) This was a lie and the generals knew that it was a lie. They had told the Kaiser that the situation was hopeless several months before the end. But this lie seemed plausible and believable to many German people. Just a few months before the end Germany seemed to be winning the war. It didn’t seem plausible to think that the military situation could have changed so quickly.

Further, the generals in question—Hindenberg in particular—were idolized by the German public. (Hindenberg was later elected President of Germany.)

2. Himmler’s Worries about the Empathy of SS Men for Their Victims

Early in the war, Jews and others slated for extermination were lined up in front of machine guns and shot. The SS troops who shot the victims were responsible for burying their victims. Invariably, not all of the victims were killed by the machine guns. Those who survived the machine guns were shot individually at close range or buried alive. What the SS men did and saw was horrible beyond all words. The graphic horror of their deeds and the manifest suffering of their victims had a very profound effect on the morale of the SS men involved with the mass killings. As heavily indoctrinated and brutalized as the SS were, most had a natural sympathy for the suffering of their victims. Some went insane; many others became alcoholics in order to deaden their sensibilities to the evil and horror of what they were doing. It is reported that Heinrich Himmler witnessed only one mass shooting and that he vomited afterwards. (This should have told him something!) Himmler addressed the “problem” of sympathy in the his speech to the SS major-generals in Posen, Poland, in October 1943. [What follows is perhaps the single most morally appalling statement I have read in my entire life]:

One basic principle must be the absolute rule for the SS man: we must be honest, decent, loyal, and comradely to members of our own blood and to nobody else. What happens to a Russian, to a Czech does not interest me in the slightest. . . . Whether nations live in prosperity or starve to death [the German word is “verrecken” —to die—used of cattle—not human beings] interests me only in so far as we need slaves for our Kultur; otherwise, it is of no interest to me. Whether 10,000 Russian females fall down from exhaustion while digging an anti-tank ditch interests me only in so far as the anti-tank ditch for Germany is finished. . . .

When someone comes to me and says “I cannot dig the anti-tank ditch with women and children, it is inhuman, for it would kill them,” then I say, “you are a murderer of your own blood because if the anti-tank ditch is not dug, German soldiers will die, and they are sons of German mothers. They are our own blood.”

Most of you must know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, or 500 or 1000. To have stuck it out and at the same time—apart from exceptions caused by human weakness—to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history.\(^9\)

This “problem” (of sympathy) caused Himmler to alter the method of mass murder. The first alternative to using machine guns was to herd people into the cargo areas of trucks and kill them by piping in exhaust fumes. But this used large quantities of gasoline and the German war machine had an inadequate supply of petroleum throughout the entire war. This method also proved unsatisfactory because the SS men in charge of the vans were disturbed by the screaming of the victims and by their pounding on the walls of the vans. The final method of mass murder adopted in the Nazi concentration camps was to kill people in gas chambers. The gas chambers were large windowless brick buildings. The victims were told that they were going to take a shower, disrobed, and marched into the gas
chambers, often to the accompaniment of music. The doors were closed and gas canisters were dropped in. (The main gas used was originally designed as a rat poison.) Those on the outside of the chambers couldn’t see or hear anything while the victims were gassed. None of the SS men had to see or hear the horror of what went on inside. Other inmates were then assigned to salvage hair, gold and other useful materials from the bodies and then burn the bodies in the crematoria. The inmates did most of the dirty work. Himmler’s solution or partial solution to the problem of sympathetic SS men was to distance the men as much as possible from the suffering that they caused and the horror of what they did. Himmler wanted to make sure that the men did not see and were not vividly aware of what they were doing. He wanted to help his men in their willful ignorance. The SS men were willfully ignorant in that they caused horrible suffering but did not want to know about or understand the suffering that they were causing. These changes resulted in only a partial solution to Himmler’s problem. There was still an extraordinarily high level of drunkenness among the SS men who apparently still felt the need to deaden their sensibilities to what they saw and did.

A Final Statement of the Argument about the Holocaust

All ideally rational moral judges would agree that the Holocaust was wrong. The first thing to note is that very few people would reject this judgment. Many present-day Nazis deny that the Holocaust occurred. This is a crackpot version of history. However, even this case reflects a fundamental agreement about certain basic moral principles. The great majority of those who call themselves Nazis agree with us that the extermination of any ethnic group would be morally wrong. Well, you might ask, what about the past? There were a lot of Nazis in Germany at one time. Many Germans, even those who were Nazis and anti-Semitic, would have disapproved of the extermination of the Jews, if they had known about it. It is important to remember that genocide was never a publicly acknowledged policy of the Nazis. Further, many people who knew about the Holocaust and who took part in it did so in bad conscience—they knew or thought that what they were doing was wrong. Well, what about those people who think (or thought) that the Holocaust was morally justified? We can show that their views are all irrational in some way. First, hard-core Nazi views are almost always based on irrational and false beliefs about the characteristics of Jewish people. Among other things, Hitler believed that Jews caused Germany’s defeat in WWI and the Great Depression of the 1930s. These beliefs are demonstrably false and absurd. All, or almost all, Nazi attitudes can be attributed to false beliefs of this sort. In addition, the views of those who approve of the Holocaust may also be irrational on account of: 1) lack of vivid awareness of suffering experienced by the victims of the Holocaust; or 2) a displacement of hostility. Some brief observations about 1) and 2). The masterminds of the Holocaust (Hitler and Himmler) were not vividly aware of the sufferings of their victims. Himmler sought to keep the perpetrators of the Holocaust (the SS troops) distanced from the sufferings of their victims. Hate groups like the Nazis “displace” hostility. Germany suffered terribly after WWI; the sufferings and anger of the people were real. But it is irrational to displace hostility on someone who wasn’t really responsible for one’s sufferings. For example, suppose that I’m being very ill-treated by my boss who constantly berates me and insults me. I am greatly angered by this but I repress my anger at him for fear of being fired. But when I come home, I displace my rage on my children. I become furious when my two-year-old child spills his milk. My displaced anger is irrational. The displaced anger of Nazis is irrational in exactly the same way.

The reader might protest that this is too easy an example; it’s easy to show that the Holocaust was wrong—no reasonable person could disagree. But this is precisely why I have focused on this particular example. For the purposes of refuting extreme versions of MER and moral skepticism (according to which no moral judgments are objectively true and no moral judgments can be rationally justified), it is sufficient to point to a single clear case of a moral judgment that is objectively true or correct and capable of being rationally justified. The clearer (and “easier”) the example, the better.

Relativism and Irrationalism

What I shall call “irrationalism” is the view that any answer to any moral question is just as good as any other answer. Irrationalists hold that whatever moral judgments a person believes or accepts are true for that person and that moral judgments are not true or correct in any other sense. Irrationalism implies that it is impossible for anyone to be mistaken in his/her moral judgments. Whatever I believe is true for me, and moral judgments cannot be true or correct in any other sense. Given this, it doesn’t make sense for us to question or criticize our own moral beliefs—criticism can’t help us avoid error. Irrationalism implies that no one’s moral judgments can ever be mistaken, even when people disagree about the answers to moral questions. What you believe is true for you and what I believe is true for me and that’s the end of it. Irrationalism completely insulates everyone’s moral views from any possible criticism.
Some metaethical relativists are irrationalists and MER is consistent with irrationalism. But MER (even extreme MER) does not commit us to this “anything goes” kind of irrationalism according to which everyone’s own moral judgments (no matter what they might be) are infallible because whatever moral judgments someone believes are true for her. Metaethical relativists deny that moral judgments are objectively true. But they are not thereby committed to the view that a moral judgment is true for someone provided that she believes it. A metaethical relativist could consistently endorse the following alternative account of what it is for a moral judgment to be “true for someone”:

A moral judgment is true for a particular person provided that she would accept it were she fully rational, i.e., if she knew all of the relevant facts about the issue in question and committed no errors of logic or reasoning in her thinking about that issue. Moral judgments are not true or correct in any other sense.11

Metaethical relativists who hold this are not committed to the view that whatever I believe is true for me. They can say that a person’s moral judgments could be mistaken. The moral judgments (or moral principles) that I actually accept might be very different than those I would accept were I fully rational.

Even if we say that there is no objectively correct answer to a moral question, it does not follow that any answer to that question is just as good as any other answer. Consider the debate about capital punishment. Is it morally permissible to execute people who are convicted of premeditated, cold-blooded murder? Reasonable people might very well disagree about the answer to this question. There might not be an objectively true or correct answer to this question (and, even if there is, we might not be capable of knowing what it is). But it doesn’t follow that all views about capital punishment are equally good or equally reasonable. Nor does it follow that we are free to believe whatever we want to believe about the morality of capital punishment. The view that murderers should be sentenced to lengthy prison terms is more reasonable than the view that murder should be punished by a very small fine. The view that we should have capital punishment for murder and murder alone is more reasonable than the view that all violations of the law, including shoplifting and jaywalking, should be punished by death. Even if there is no single objectively correct answer to a given moral question, some answers may be more reasonable than others.

Conclusions

I’ve distinguished between many different versions of moral relativism. This is important because people mean different things when they say that morality is relative. Most of us find, on examination, that we accept certain versions of moral relativism, but not others. Situational relativism and certain versions of CR are clearly true. Normative relativism is clearly false. The answer to the question “is moral relativism true?” can’t be a simple “yes” or “no.” We need to make clear which version of relativism we are talking about. I’ve discussed the example of the Nazi Holocaust in considerable detail. All ideally rational moral judges would agree that what the Nazis did was wrong. This shows that some moral judgments are objectively true and can be rationally justified. It follows that extreme MER and extreme moral skepticism are false. Even if MER were true, it would not commit us to an “anything goes” kind of irrationalism according to which whatever moral judgments a person accepts are “true for” her.

Study Questions

1) Explain the difference between moral skepticism and metaethical relativism (MER).

2) Explain the difference between cultural relativism and MER.

3) Explain the difference between normative relativism and MER. Think of examples to illustrate this. What would the two theories say about the institution of slavery as it once existed in the United States?

4) What is CR a theory about?

5) What is NR a theory about?

6) What is MER a theory about?

7) How would a normative relativist answer the following questions:
   a) Would it be morally permissible for William L. Wilberforce (a famous British abolitionist) or Martin Luther King Jr. to own slaves? Was it morally permissible for Jefferson Davis (President of the Confederate States of America) to own slaves?
   b) Was the slavery practiced in ancient Egypt morally permissible?

8) What is moral realism and what is the relation between moral realism and MER?

9) Suppose that two people disagree about the answer to an ethical question; one person says that a certain act is right and another person says that the same act is wrong. Can we ever be justified in saying
the one person is correct in his/her judgment and the other person mistaken? Think of concrete examples.

10) Does the phenomenon of disagreement provide us with good reasons for accepting MER? How significant are the differences between disagreement about morality and disagreements about other matters?

11) Could rational moral judges disagree about moral questions? Could they disagree in their views about all moral questions?

12) What is "irrationalism" and how does it differ from MER?

Notes

I am indebted to the editor, an anonymous referee, Tom Wren, Harry Gensler, Jason Beyer, and members of the Faculty Ethics Seminar on Moral Relativism at Loyola University for helpful criticisms of earlier versions of this paper. This paper developed out of a series of conversations I had with the late Bill Williams at Virginia Tech in the 1970s. I dedicate this paper to his memory.


2. My discussion of this is taken from Brandt's article "Ethical Relativism" in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, op. cit.


8. Roughly one million Germans died from hunger and malnutrition caused by the British naval blockade. I take these figures from Martin Gilbert's book The First World War (New York: Henry Holt, 1994). According to Gilbert, 762,106 Germans died during the war as a result of the blockade. The British naval blockade continued after the Armistice of November 11, 1918, until Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles in May of 1919. Several hundred thousand more deaths were caused by the blockade during this time (pp. 256). The blockade was used to compel Germany to accede to the harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty. Gilbert quotes Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, the senior German delegate to the treaty negotiations:

The hundreds of thousands of non-combatants who have perished since November 11 by reason of the blockade were killed with cold deliberation, after our adversaries had conquered and victory had been assured them. Think of that when you speak of guilt and punishment (quoted in Gilbert, p. 511).


10. Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, said that the extermination of the Jews was something that SS men must never speak about publicly. Let me quote from Himmler's speech to the SS major-generals in Posen, Poland, in October 1943:

I want to talk to you, quite frankly, on a very grave matter. Among ourselves it should be mentioned quite frankly, and yet we will never speak of it publicly. Just as we did not hesitate on June 30th, 1934 to do the duty we were bidden and stand comrades who had lapsed up against the wall and shoot them, so we have never spoken about it and will never speak of it. It was that tact which is a matter of course and which I am glad to say, is inherent in us, that made us never discuss it among ourselves, never to speak of it. It appalled everyone, and yet everyone was certain that he would do it the next time if such orders are issued and if it is necessary. I mean the clearing out of the Jews, the extermination of the Jewish race. . . . This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and will never be written (p. 563).


11. Inasmuch as all ideally rational human beings would agree about at least some moral questions, this view can't be squared with extreme MER.

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