Can We Be Both Moral Relativists and Moral?

Occasions arise where some behaviour that would be deemed immoral when occurring in one culture is justified by pointing out that it is happening in another culture which regards it as at least morally acceptable. Some form of cultural moral relativism is cited, and the claim is made that judging it 'from without' is 'cultural imperialism'.

I will consider how we might set about comparing moral codes between societies and review some empirical work that suggests descriptive moral relativism may well be incorrect. I will then suggest that moral phenomenology contains a normative experience of an obligation as an external demand. I argue for the claim that any relativist or non-realist metaethics is inconsistent with moral phenomenology and that normativity is incompatible with moral relativism. I shall also argue that relativism degenerates into moral solipsism. Finally I then suggest that we should look towards a variety of pragmatism to justify the practice of moral dialogue.

The article on 'Moral Relativism' in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy[1] offers two characterisations of moral relativism:

> "*Descriptive Moral Relativism* (*DMR*). As a matter of empirical fact, there are deep and widespread moral disagreements across different societies, and these disagreements are much more significant than whatever agreements there may be."

(This would contrast with the claim that although there may be apparent moral disagreements, they are largely different realisations of what are the same moral values when viewed at a sufficiently fundamental level.)

> "*Metaethical Moral Relativism* (*MMR*). The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons."

The first characterisation is the kind of moral relativism that is of interest to, say, anthropologists when studying societies and cultures. The claim may or may not be true, but its status as an empirical claim seems, at first sight, to be uncontentious. It is a statement about the existence of differences between societies, not about the truth, or otherwise, of moral judgements made in those societies.

The second characterisation is the kind of moral relativism that interests moral philosophers, and is very much about the truth, assertability, justification, and so on, of moral claims made within societies. It is also the kind of moral relativism that is at stake in the many disputes that arise about the he acceptability of different practices in different communities, cultures or societies.

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[1] (Gowans, Chris, "Moral Relativism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/moral-relativism/>.)

But the first characterisation (DMR) is not without its philosophical problems and I first intend to say something about it if only because some such assumption is often made when discussing the second. So I'd like first to identify on two questions: (1) how do we identify what counts as 'moral' in a particular culture or society? and (2) what counts as a culture or a society? I'll then return to the second characterisation (MMR) and to the coherence of such a position.

I will start with question (1).

How in general do we set about marking out the domain of 'the moral'? How do we go about identifying the domain of 'the moral' in different cultures or societies in order to compare them?

Let us for a moment take it that societies all have 'standards of conduct' and that some of these are 'moral' in nature. Are the 'moral' standards 'moral' in virtue of their form or their content?

By 'form' I mean: are moral standards moral not simply in virtue of what they are about, but in virtue of the stance that we take towards them? For example, they place certain demands on us, they override other considerations, they occupy a central *regulative* role in society.

Or are 'moral' standards 'moral' in virtue of what they are about, that is, in having certain content, or subject matter? That is, morality is characterised by (elements of) its content.

It is possible that the two characterisations pick out different kinds of standards of conduct. If morality is characterised by its form, its regulatory role, it may, for example, include behavioural codes that we would more naturally describe as religious or ritualistic. However, if morality is characterised by content, for a society's standards of conduct to be *moral* standards they must be consistent with that content. (It may be a 'basic' content that underlies differing realisations – the same basic content may be treated in different ways.)

The latter approach, however, immediately renders descriptive moral relativism false. Demarcating the 'moral' by its content would mean that in essence the same content would be picked out, should it be present, in the societies being compared and hence the essence of morality, if present, would be the same in those different societies. We would be reduced to asking: to what extent do other cultures have a moral code? – the question being answered by reference to what *we* take to be the content of a moral code. This rules out moral relativism.

This leaves us with morality as form or structure, in its being regulative, conduct-guiding, in a particular way. If we are demarcating morality descriptively in different cultures, then this option seems the most natural approach. We will not be making prior judgements on content, or on the religious or ritual nature of the codes.

We can look at discourses and practices in different cultures and identify those that exhibit the structural and attitudinal features that we think are common to moral practices; typically,

those that are appropriately authoritative and directive; those which invoke attitudes of approval and disapproval, those that have social sanctions against them, and so on.

Once we have identified the moral domains in different cultures, we can then go on to determine whether the function and content of the moralities identified have commonalities.

Anthropologists at Oxford University recently undertook such an exercise of the sort I have been describing. The researchers claim[2] to have:

> "… discovered what they believe to be seven universal moral rules. The rules: help your family, help your group, return favours, be brave, defer to superiors, divide resources fairly, and respect others' property were found in a survey of 60 cultures from all around the world." (Oxford 2019)

> "… People everywhere face a similar set of problems, and use a similar set of moral rules to solve them. As predicted, these seven moral rules appear to be universal across cultures. Everyone everywhere shares a common moral code. All agree that cooperating, promoting the common good, is the right thing to do." (Oxford 2019)

> "The research found, first, that these seven cooperative behaviours were always considered morally good. Second, examples of most of these morals were found in most societies. Crucially, there were no counter-examples – no societies in which any of these behaviours were considered morally bad. And third, these morals were observed with equal frequency across continents; they were not the exclusive preserve of 'the West' or any other region." (Oxford 2019)

> "The study also detected 'variation on a theme' – although all societies seemed to agree on the seven basic moral rules, they varied in how they prioritised or ranked them." (Oxford 2019)

I want to bring out two points from this account.

- The researchers must have come up with a way to distinguish moral codes and practices from other codes and practices in order to carry out cross-cultural comparisons.

- This method of distinguishing moral practices cannot include any substantial moral content because it is the content in different cultures that they wish to compare.

We are working with the assumption that morality is a complex set of practices which has particular structural, conduct-guiding features. In the 'Oxford' research, to determine whether their predicted moral content is actually part of the morality in a culture they looked to see whether it is presented in an appropriate way within that culture as recorded in ethnographic accounts; whether it is directive in the right way.

> "Having identified instances of the cooperative behaviors of interest, the next task was to determine whether they were presented in a morally valenced way, and if so

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[2] (Oxford 2019) http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2019-02-11-seven-moral-rules-found-all-around-world

whether the valence was positive or negative. Thus the code book instructed coders to record whether the behavior was described as good, right, moral, ethical, or virtuous, or as an obligation, duty, or moral norm, and so on. It could also be indicated by morally valenced words. For example, the mere mention of "family loyalty" or "property rights" would suffice to indicate the presence of a positive moral valence." (Oxford 2019)

Does the Oxford study make a case against descriptive moral relativism? It seems to have sought to take a set of behaviours, 'morality as cooperation', and investigated whether instances of cooperative behaviours formed part of the moral practices of a wide variety of societies. But if this is what was done, it does not seem to identify whether they are a *core* element of the moralities of these different societies. They form a component, but how significant a component is undetermined. Looking at it another way, each of the various moral codes could have included different significant practices not looked for and incompatible with each other.

If this is how the study was conducted, it theoretically leaves the question of descriptive moral relativism unresolved. However, it does offer evidence of some similarity between moralities in a wide range of different societies. Insofar as the similarity is between basic elements of the moral codes, this weakens any case for metaethical moral relativism that uses descriptive moral relativism as support.

We have already drawn a distinction between descriptive and metaethical moral relativism. Before considering the metaethical version, I want to consider *normative* moral relativism. Descriptive relativism claims that moral codes vary from culture to culture – they are relative to their culture. Normative relativism is more difficult to state. It is something like the view that, at least, we *ought* to tolerate other cultures' moral codes, or, perhaps, that we ought to tolerate the actions of those in any culture where they conform to the moral code of that culture.

The problem then arises for locating the (presumably *moral*) 'ought' of compliance or toleration, if moral 'oughts' only hold relative to a culture. Does the obligation to toleration exist relative to our culture, other cultures, or some all-encompassing culture? The requirements of normative relativism look suspiciously like absolute moral requirements unless we do not demand reciprocal toleration between cultures but only toleration within our culture of other cultures.

How does normative relativism relate to metaethical relativism? Metaethical relativism gives rise to normative relativism because it claims that moral principles will be true, or assertable, or justified relative to one's culture, and presumably one *ought* to follow principles that are true, assertible or justified. However, if metaethical relativism is incorrect, and assuming that there *are* moral principles, then the truth, assertability or justification is independent of culture and hence normative relativism cannot be correct.

I want now to consider the phenomenology of morality. I intend to claim that the phenomenology of morality is incompatible with moral relativism. My argument will exploit

'the unresolvable tension' as Mark Jenkins[3] elegantly expresses it, there is 'between ethical conviction and contingency' (2006, p186).

Horgan and Timmons[4] give a description of moral phenomenology (based on Mandelbaum[5]). Three main features of experiences of direct moral obligation are identified, and I wish to concentrate on the first two

"… main features:

1. "They are *ought-judgment involving:* an agent having or under- going such an experience judges of herself that in the present circumstances she ought or ought not perform some action.
2. "This ought-judgment is part of an overall moral experience in which one experiences a *felt demand* whose elements include (a) a feeling of pressure, (b) a sense of a vector-like force which has an "external" origin and is directed at oneself, and (c) an associated motivational pull toward either performing an action or refraining from performing an action." (Horgan & Timmons (2008), p288)

I would add an additional feature:

- The ought-judgement is seen to be categorical. It is not dependent upon other goals, nor does it seem to us to be contingent upon our personal history or current circumstances (although our recognising the judgement, might be).

Horgan and Timmons claim that:

"… there is one metaethical position, "cognitivist expressivism," that (a) seems very promising in its capacity to accommodate the facts of moral phenomenology (without overlooking or distorting the facts in question) but (b) denies that moral judgments are robustly objective." (Horgan & Timmons (2008), p290)

But I suggest that the problem is not so much whether there is an ethical theory that can describe or explain why we have the outlined phenomenology without invoking robust objectivism, but rather whether, psychologically, our phenomenological experience can withstand acceptance of such a theory; whether the moral demand can remain unaffected. If we accept 'cognitive expressivism' then this explains our (mistaken) view that moral judgements are objective. The question is then: can we then continue to experience them as 'felt demands' as we did before? To which I think the answer is: no, or only at the price of cognitive dissonance.   Our metaethics and normative ethical experience need to be consistent. Otherwise our moral phenomenology has been 'debunked' by our metaethics.

The suggestion is that moral claims seem to present themselves phenomenologically as requirements over and against our inclinations and wishes. They seem to arise as external

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[3] Mark Jenkins, *Bernard Williams* (Chesham: Acumen, 2006)
[4] Horgan and Timmons, 'What does Moral Phenomenology tell us about Moral Objectivity?', in *Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation*, USA, 2008)
[5] Maurice Mandelbaum 'The Phenomenology of Moral Experience (Glencoe, IL: The New Press, 1955)

demands to which we are called to conform. If we take this at face value, then it becomes hard to regard them simultaneously as somehow arising either from our own motivations, however moderated, or simply from societal norms.

If we agree with the characterisation of moral phenomenology given here, any forms of expressivism, fictionalism, and so on, seem at root to be just varieties of nihilism.

We can, I suppose, continue with some form of *near* moral relativism if we think that there is one absolute moral requirement, that of cultural tolerance – the moral judgements in different cultures are to be respected. But why is this particular requirement the best candidate for an absolute moral requirement?

It may be that our phenomenological experience can be accommodated in a moral theory that does not posit moral absolutism. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Horgan and Timmons claim that the objective phenomenology of morality is consistent with their 'cognitivist expressivism'. However, I am not convinced that the objective phenomenology of morality is consistent with our *believing* in cognitivist expressivism. This point is closely related to Mackie's thought[6] that although morality is an 'error', it "might be thought dangerous, and in any case unnecessary, to expose it as a fiction. It is disputable." (1977, p239). Morality, in its overriding, obligatory form, only works if we think it *true* in some sense. It loses its obligatory nature if we take it as at bottom a feeling, a belief about a feeling, or a convention.

The upshot of my argument so far is that moral relativism is inconsistent with the kind of normativity that we usually take morality to have – a demand, or sense of overriding obligation.

I will now argue further that moral relativism does not allow moral claims to be normatively demanding. I have derived my argument in this section from a more sophisticated argument of Paul Boghossian[7].

At its simplest, the argument is that the statement 'this is (morally) wrong' is a normative claim, but once a relational qualification is added – say, 'this is wrong in this culture' or even "'this is wrong' is true in this culture", the normative import is lost and it becomes a descriptive claim. To be told 'killing is wrong' is to be normatively directed – 'don't kill'; to be told 'killing is wrong in France' is a descriptive claim about moral codes in France. Insofar as there could be said to be any directive element to this it would perhaps be 'when in France, don't kill', which at best would be a pragmatic recommendation, or perhaps an indication of what would be good manners.

These considerations lead us to the conclusion that moral claims cannot be relativised without losing their normativity.   Hence metaethical moral relativism and normative relativism are problematic positions to hold. But the phenomenology of an 'external demand'

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[6] J. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 1977, Harmondsworth: Penguin
[7] Paul Boghossian 'Relativity about Morality' https://as.nyu.edu/content/dam/nyu-as/asSilverDialogues/documents/PBoghossian-RelAboutNorm-final-SilverDialogues%20v3.pdf (accessed 6/12/2020)

is also difficult to support if morality is seen either as arising internally in an agent or being a consequence of some sort of convention. The lack of truth, assertability or justification of moral claims mean that they cannot present an external demand as required by moral phenomenology. If we take the phenomenology as an essential feature of morality we are seemingly presented with a choice: either moral non-relativism (absolutism) or moral nihilism. I assume here, without argument, that many find both options unpalatable.

Moral requirements can only function normatively if we have confidence that they are objective requirements. Our observations that different cultures, or even different individuals, claim to have different moral requirements does not logically require us to give up our belief that we are obligated to adhere to what we perceive as morally required. Others may just be wrong. Nevertheless, it cannot be emphasised strongly enough that a belief that morality is absolute certainly does not entail that it is the moral code of one's own culture that is correct.

However, awareness of the existence of other, different, codes of morality can have a weakening effect psychologically. As Christopher Hamilton[8] writes: "It is, I think, simply too late in the day to flee the tragic acknowledgement that our values, even though we are committed to them, are contingent and could have been otherwise." (2016, p138)

I suggest that if we take the view that our moral values are those we just happen to have, contingently, then however strongly we hold them, our commitment to them is thereby weakened and our moral confidence diminished.

A society (call it society A) may or may not have a moral code with universalising tendencies. If it does, then it may make claims on behalf of, or against, members of another society, B. The fact that society B's moral codes are in disagreement with society A's does not logically require members of society A to be indifferent about the conditions of members of society B.

The attribution of blame may be affected, however. Although Society A may hold that actions deemed to be morally acceptable in society B are morally wrong, it may seem inappropriate to blame members of society B effectively simply for having been raised in society B. However, as alluded to earlier, anyone making cross-cultural moral judgements needs to do so with modesty and care. There can be no unthinking presumption of correctness and no assumption of moral superiority.

I have been talking about societies and cultures. At the beginning I put the question of what counts as *a* culture or society on hold. I have not answered this, and I'd like to return to it, but only to suggest that there is no need to answer it. No culture or society exhibits total uniformity of moral belief, and all have porous boundaries (even North Korea). So where to draw the line? Why not between different identities? But what about intersectionality? Then why not round each individual? If so, moral truth is what is *true for me*.

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[8] C. Hamilton, A Philosophy of Tragedy, London: Reaktion Books, 2016

There have been attempts to address the problem of moral relativism by using an indexed notion of truth. These approaches suggest that in the claim "'this is wrong' is true", 'true' is indexed to the speaker, in a similar way to the claim "'I am here' is true" is indexed to the speaker's spatial and temporal location.

My moral judgements are correct because I am the measure of morality. I am, we might say, a moral solipsist. But then there can be no disagreement because there is nothing to disagree about. If something is true for me, and it is not true for you, there is no conflict, only different truths.

So finally, do these discussions lead us to lose confidence in our moral values and have our convictions weakened? Do we water down our notion of morality and perhaps assimilate moral judgements to (strongly held) opinions on matters of taste? I have already given some reasons why moral relativism may not be a coherent position. For many, moral nihilism is unappetising, if not unachievable in practice. So before giving in too readily, let us see whether we can perhaps find an alternative.

Moral solipsism is not an option. Given that we do have moral commitments, many involving the lives of others, we will want, and need, to argue with them and persuade them of our views. Morality is essentially a public, not a private, business. And I suggest that aiming at truth is *constitutive* of argument. What is going on when we cite evidence, marshal rational arguments and so on except an attempt to justify our opinion and show that it is *correct*? (There is an alternative view, that what is going on is a power struggle, an attempt at dominance, or, perhaps, 'mere' rhetoric – without the *logos* and *ethos* and ending up in some kind of satisfying or therapeutic *pathos*. Truth is not at stake. But if so, how can one argue for this view? What is the status of this claim – is it *true*?)

Maybe we can learn something from pragmatists such as Huw Price. Price[9] makes a far more sophisticated pragmatic case for the indispensability of the notion of truth than I offer here (even if such a notion is a fiction).   He suggests that it is best for a pragmatist to ask *explanatory* questions about truth: "Why do we have such a notion? What job does it do in language? What features does it need to have to play this role? And how would things be different if we didn't have it?" (Price 2003, p175)

Price claims that

> "… [i]f we did not have a normative notion in addition to the norms of subjective assertibility and personal warranted assertibility, the idea that we might improve our commitments by seeking to align them with those of our community would be simply incoherent." (Price 2003, p175)

This normative notion "not only creates the conceptual space for argument … but actively encourages speakers to participate." (Price 2003, p175)

He goes on to suggest that

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[9] Huw Price, 'Truth as Convenient Friction' in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 100, No 4, Apr., 2003, pp167-190

> "[w]ithout truth, the wheels of argument do not engage; disagreements slide past one another. This is true of disagreements about any matter whatsoever. … If we didn't already have truth … we could be aware that we have different opinions about what is warrantedly assertible, without that difference of opinion seeming to matter. … The crucial point is … that assertoric dialogue requires an intolerance of disagreement." (Price 2003, pp185-186)

But where does this view on truth leave us? It suggests that without a normative notion of truth there is little prospect of any meaningful discussion of moral issues. In the end it makes little practical difference whether we think there are objective moral truths or whether we adopt this pragmatic approach, because even if there are objective moral truths we would still have to find out what those objective truths are. And how else could we discover them but by discussing, arguing and reasoning, and, just possibly, by agreeing?

So, in conclusion, the pragmatic approach requires, first, that moral judgements are to be discussed and argued over, and improvement and agreement sought. But second, it also requires that even if we are sceptical of the notion of (capital T) Truth, if we want to argue about morality and improve our judgements, we must reason as if there is a truth to be found. Not truth relative to our culture or to our society, or truth for me; just *truth*.