

A Relative Defence
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In Issue Two (Autumn 2002) of *Think*, Stephen Law (“Is it all relative?”) and Simon Blackburn (“Relatively speaking”) both argued against ethical relativism. If there’s any truth in relativism, it’s not easy to find or to formulate. But I’m going to try. Not because I’m certain that relativism is true, but because the sort of relativism I’m going to defend here has more going for it than a lot of people realise.

All relativism starts with disagreement; it wants to claim that what seems to be a disagreement is not really a disagreement. The quickest way to explain this is to say that the two people who are disagreeing are actually making claims that are each ‘true for them’. This is the kind of relativism Law and Blackburn discuss. I want to suggest two changes. First, instead of saying there is no disagreement, I will argue for a type of relativism that says there *is* a disagreement, but there doesn’t *need* to be one. I’ll argue that if we understand ethics better, we will *want* relativism to be true.

Second, Law and Blackburn don’t distinguish between different types of relativism. In particular, they believe relativism between *individuals* and relativism between *cultures* are similar. And so they argue that any form of relativism ends up saying that something can be right for me and wrong for you over *any* moral disagreement. But this is only true according to relativism between individuals. If cultural relativism is true, it is only disagreements between the ethical views of different cultures which are relative. There are loads of disagreements, for instance between individuals within one culture, which aren’t relative at all. I’ll argue for cultural relativism, which is much more plausible.

Relativism in ethics is already more attractive to many people than relativism about scientific claims. Since relativism starts with disagreement, we should look at the nature of disagreement in science and ethics. In particular, how we can understand what would explain an *end* to disagreement in each case? Whether or not we actually reach agreement on scientific or ethical matters is irrelevant here. The question is, if we did, how would we explain how that came about? With science, the best explanation would be that the scientific theories we have agreed upon represent how the world is – the world has *guided* our investigations, confirming or falsifying hypotheses through experiment, until we understood what the world is like. In ethics, this doesn’t seem to be true. To see this, we need to think more about ethical practices.

There are two ways of understanding ethical practices. We can either say that different cultures, with their different ethical practices, their different ethical concepts, their different ethical judgments, are all trying to get at the *truth* about ethics, just as scientists are trying to find out the truth about the world. Or we can say that ethical practices are simply part of a culture’s *way of living*. The relativist, of course, will say the latter.

Suppose that I am disagreeing with an Indian friend of mine, Rajiv, over whether it is right to put one’s parents in an old people’s home when they can no longer cope on their own. I am arguing that there is nothing wrong with it; he is arguing that it would be

gross dereliction of duty. He cites the importance of the family, the wisdom old people can bring to one's life, the reciprocal duty of care that gratitude for one's childhood imposes; I cite the importance of individualism, the impossibility of sustaining the development of a career while being a carer, the loneliness of not being around one's peer group. We can understand the reasons we cite, the social institutions they reflect (e.g. extended v. nuclear family), and the virtues of character we hold dearest (care v. independence) either as attempts to get at the 'truth' about how one should relate to one's elderly parents, or as reflecting different practices cultures have developed in this regard. I think the latter is more persuasive. The most obvious explanation of our disagreement is that our views reflect the ethical practices of our respective cultures.

The idea that two cultures are both trying to find 'the truth' about ethics seems silly. In many, many cases, it doesn't sit well with an understanding of the history of that culture and how its ethical practices developed. And since at least one culture is wrong, we would also need to explain why that culture had 'got it wrong': why couldn't people in that culture see what was independently right and do that? This is a very awkward question. Relativism, however, understands ethical practices as part of a culture; ethical practices have developed to help people find their way around a social world. But there are *many* social worlds, many cultures, and they have developed different ways of doing things. And this is the crucial contrast with science, which investigates the *one* physical world. There is just one physical world which can guide scientific investigations towards agreement, but there is not just one social world which can guide ethical practices towards agreement.

Understanding ethics this way seems highly plausible to me. But because ethical practices are not tied to the one physical world in the same way science is, we cannot believe that ethical disagreements between cultures will be resolved by being guided by the way the world is. The question at stake between Rajiv and me over whether it is right to put one's parents in an old people's home is a question about *which social world* – which set of social institutions, forms of relationship, and traits of character – *is better*. It is not whether we might personally adopt the practice of the other (or something similar). Rather, it is whether either of our societies should condone or pursue the social transformation that would be necessary for our society to adopt the practice of the other. But where is the answer to this question going to come from? Each of us appeal to the reasons, the social institutions, relationships, and virtues of our own culture. These are its 'ethical resources'. A general definition might be: a culture's ethical resources are whatever someone who lived in and was familiar with only that culture could use to talk about and understand ethical questions. (This may mean that, in the modern world, relativism is obsolete – the ethical resources of cultures have interpenetrated.)

If someone puts the argument I've just outlined to Rajiv and me, and we are persuaded by it, then we might start to be a little uncomfortable insisting on how right we are, and how wrong the other is. Our disagreement doesn't seem quite so straightforward any more. Certainly, in a practical sense, we disagree. We cannot live according to both cultures at once; the two sets of ethical practices exclude each other. But how are we to respond to this? To continue to insist on our own positions, as we developed them, looks naïve and presumptuous. But to give up our ethical views is preposterous – the argument that got us to this position emphasises the importance of ethics for social life.

Of course, there are times when to accept that you live your way and I live mine will feel like giving up one's ethical views. Blackburn, for instance, is concerned that relativism will leave us without resources to condemn ethical practices that are corrupt, ignorant, wishful, or evil. But I'm not sure of this. The relativism I'm defending does not claim that all social practices are acceptable, that no individual and no practice can be condemned. People do wrong all the time, and relativism does not pretend otherwise. But it claims that to condemn an action or practice as wrongful, one must use resources from *within the culture* to which that practice or individual belongs. The reasons given for its wrongness must be reasons that are available within the culture. And even a prevalent practice can often be condemned on these grounds, because reasons for change lie in the (perhaps marginalized) practices and consciousness of those who are being badly treated by that practice. Relativism, then, only applies when the reasons for a particular social world stem from within it while the reasons against it stem from outside that world, from a *different* culture. Relativism says that a practice is wrong if it is wrong for reasons available to that culture; and so, if you and I are from different cultures, a practice can be wrong for you and right for me. The reasons given are incommensurable, and it seems there are no further grounds for adjudicating their strength.

What if there are no resources within a culture with which to condemn some of its practices? If this is ever true, this is a problem for relativism, and possibly its downfall. But even here, the best answer is the most relativistic alternative to relativism. I said earlier that the question facing me and Rajiv is "which is the better social world?". The difficulty with producing an answer is that arguments for each world come from within that world. But this doesn't *automatically* mean that the arguments are different. Two cultures can independently arrive at the same values. And I think we have strong reason to believe that there are some values – very vaguely specified – which emerge from at least the vast majority of human cultures, for example, the values of human life, of care for dependents, of truth-telling. Where a social world simply flaunts 'universal values', there we might be able to say that it is not the better social world, and condemn it. This is a step away from relativism, but can only happen rarely, since the values at stake are almost universal.

But relativism is not, on the whole, undermined by 'universal values'. First, these 'universal values' emerge from *within* each culture, so the idea of appealing only to each culture's ethical resources remains; second, the values are *differently interpreted* in each; and third, *there is no universal way of ranking them*. All-in-all, specific ethical practices are more than interpretations of 'universal values'; they have much more detail and depth to them than that. And they support and embody many values that are not universal, and which cannot be, for they could not be realized at the same time – in any set of practices – as other non-universal values. And so we will be faced with two social worlds, both of which invoke these values but each of which contains ethical practices that are in conflict with the practices of the other world. And here relativism provides the most plausible analysis of the relation between the two social worlds. Relativism says each is acceptable in its place. Neither social world is better. There is no answer to the question Rajiv and I are discussing. We are both right – for our own cultures.

In summary: once we recognise this type of value pluralism and incommensurability, which we must when we understand the nature of ethical practices, relativism appears to be a very *attractive* option. All ways of living a human life are

culturally specific, and these culturally specific ways cannot be co-ordinated into a single overarching way. A set of ‘universal values’ – values that emerge from almost every human culture – give us the grounds on which to say that some cultures are ethically bereft, and so clearly worse social worlds in which to live – from almost everyone’s point of view. But ‘universal values’ are insufficient to ground *any* way of life, for they are vague and indeterminate, while every way of life is specific and determinate. Whenever we wish to make an ethical evaluation, relativism points us to the resources available within a culture. But these resources are considerable, and we should not fear that morality will be undermined by this recognition.

Relativism is much more than simply encouraging toleration. It gives us insight into the human situation, and one that can provide some understanding of both toleration and its limits. It takes a step beyond tolerating alternatives which ‘we’ have no reason to condemn (as Blackburn and Law put it), for to consider just our own reasons is too narrow. It asks us to consider whether ‘they’ have reason to condemn it (and if it is a vile practice, they very often will). And so it encourages a particular form of inter-cultural ethical dialogue, and it accounts for the limits of such dialogue. Finally, it can give us confidence in our own ethical practices, even when they are different from the ethical practices of other cultures – for the difference is no longer a threat; but it does not encourage ethical complacency, because there may well be ways to make a social world a better social world by its own standards.

I said at the outset that I wasn’t sure relativism is ultimately true. More accurately, I’m not sure that the position I’ve defended is ultimately a form of relativism. If we think seriously about ethical ‘development’ within cultures and about the interaction between ‘universal values’ and specific ethical practices, perhaps just a few contenders for ‘best social world’ – for everyone – will emerge. And even if relativism is true, I’m not sure it applies anymore, since we can’t pretend that any culture has an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ which are clearly distinct. But my aim was not to finally establish the truth of relativism, but to show how much truth there might be in it. Quite a lot, really.

Further reading:

Williams, B. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), Ch. 8, 9
MacIntyre, A. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988)

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