Terrorism undermines the Credibility of Moral Relativism

Vicente Medina
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Department of Philosophy
Seton Hall University
400 South Orange Ave.
South Orange, NJ 07079
E-mail: medinavi@shu.edu

ABSTRACT

The adage, "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter," is offered as a plausible example of evoking moral relativism. Moral relativists recognize no transcultural moral facts. So, for them, even the concept of harm would be subjective or context-sensitive. Yet one can appeal to cogent transcultural moral reasons to distinguish between deliberately and unjustifiably harming impeccably innocent people and those who might engage in justifiably harming those guilty of grave crimes. In the face of the preventable evil acts that terrorists frequently perpetrate against impeccably innocent people, it is argued that moral relativists have a substantive burden of proof to demonstrate that no cogent transcultural moral reasons exist against the practice of terrorism. In the absence of such a demonstration, it is reasonable to believe that the practice of terrorism, while not totally defeating moral relativism, seems to undermine its credibility.

Submission for TELOS Conference, *Beyond Nostalgia: Ethics, Politics, and The Critique of Modernity*

Word count: 2330

While the expression "moral relativism" means different things to different people, I offer the following characterization of it. By "moral relativism," I understand a normative view that explains people's incommensurable moral judgments based on their subjective preferences or on different action-guiding contexts. Moral relativists deny that value judgments can be universally justified. Therefore, for them, value judgments have neither objective universal truth-value nor universal moral import. That is, these judgments are neither true nor false, nor right or wrong for everyone. For some moral relativists even to raise the possibility of moral disagreement across different cultures or communities would be simply moot.[1]

Moral relativists can assume a subjective or a contextual point of view. If they assume a subjective point of view, one might describe their theories or hypotheses as nihilistic. Nihilists recognize no transcendent moral values and no moral facts.[2] According to them, predicates, such as right or wrong, or good or bad, have no independent reference. So nihilists recognize no significant moral difference between, for example, the deliberate killing of the objectively innocent, which is considered murder by most civilized people, and killing in self-defense. For them, even the principle of the presumption of innocence would be vacuous.

I concede that moral nihilism might be logically coherent. Nevertheless, I have serious doubts that it would be practically desirable to hold such a view. Without a minimum sense of shared solidarity among its members, it is difficult to envision a society of only nihilists holding together for a long time. As Simon Blackburn perceptively puts it, "For human beings, there is no living without standards of living."[3] Be the standards local or universal, shared standards nonetheless they must be. Since people across the globe recognize such a minimum sense of

---

[1] J. David Velleman, *Foundations for Moral Relativism* (Open Book Publishers, 2013), p. 25.
[2] See, e.g., Max Stirner, *The Ego and his Own.* Trans. Steven T. Byington (New York: Modern Library, 1918), p. 5.
[3] Simon Blackburn, *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 23.

shared solidarity as being an important value for holding a minimally decent society together, moral nihilism seems rather farfetched.

Some people, including reputable scholars, misrepresent terrorists, especially militant Islamists, as nihilists.[4] Militant Islamists, however, seem not to be nihilists because they are motivated by a belligerent interpretation of the Quran, which they believe to be true. Moreover, they believe that their political violence is justified. For some alleged terrorists, like the late Osama bin Laden, political violence or the threat of it does matter. Hence, he distinguished between "ill-advised terrorism" and "good terrorism." He wrote: "America and Israel practice ill-advised terrorism, and we [i.e., Bin Laden and his acolytes] practice good terrorism."[5]

Those who invoke the slogan, "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter," might be offering a morally relativist hypothesis. For instance, they might defend their view based on the following principle: the same judgment that is conceived of as true or right in one context, namely a given local culture or community, is conceived of as false or wrong in a different context.

Some moral relativists, such as Gilbert Harman, argue that value judgments could be accurately described as true or false, or as right or wrong, independently of people's beliefs. Harman conceives of these judgments as true or false, or as right or wrong within a local context (either a local culture or community) where people openly or tacitly acknowledge them.[6] Other moral relativists, such as Velleman, contend that value judgments could be accurately described

---

[4] See, e.g., Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 112–114. See also Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 124.

[5] Osama Bin Laden, "Terror for Terror." In Bruce Lawrence (ed.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Verso, 2005), p. 120.

[6] Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended." In Michael Kraus and Jack W Meiland (eds.), *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), pp. 189–190.

as true or false, or as right or wrong, only within a given local context (either a local culture or a community) where these judgments make sense to the members of the local culture or community.

By contrast, ethical universalists, like utilitarians and deontologists, are cognitivists who argue for a strong version of objectivity. They recognize either that we can know the truth of some transcultural moral claims or at least that we can justifiably believe some transcultural moral judgments whose reasonableness can be objectively gauged. Unlike ethical universalists, moral relativists in general deny that such strong version of objectivity exists. As a result, they argue that based on diverse empirical evidence the belief in ethical universalism is ill-founded.

Those who hold a relativist interpretation of the sentence "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter" are likely to appeal to relativist reasons to try to undermine ethical universalism. In what follows, I propose to focus on some of their reasons.

Moral relativists could argue that since there is no invariant universally accepted definition of the terms "terrorist" and "freedom fighter," these terms are referentially opaque. Hence, for them, the above sentence is ambiguous at best. It might, for example, simply evoke people's feelings. Those who approve the violence perpetrated by an individual or group could identify them as freedom fighters, while those who disapprove of the violence perpetrated by the same individual or group could identify them as terrorists.

Still, when one challenges moral relativists, they frequently revert to descriptive relativism. But descriptive relativism only proves the evident, namely, that sometimes individuals harbor conflicting moral judgments regarding the same contestable issue based on different sets of beliefs. The point, however, is whether they can justify their beliefs. Justification

depends on the reasons one can offer to support one's beliefs, and whether those reasons stand to scrutiny and thereby pass muster based on reliability, coherence, and sound arguments.

Moral relativists are reluctant to accept that people's capacity for reasoning could provide transcultural moral knowledge. Nevertheless, when making judgments, our reasons could be well-founded, namely based on epistemically and/or normatively justified beliefs, or they could be ill-founded, namely based on epistemically and/or normatively questionable beliefs. For example, I can reasonably and objectively defend the following value judgment as being inter-contextually meaningful: "Malala Yousafzai's way of life is better than Osama bin Laden's way of life."

I have reason to believe that the above-mentioned sentence expresses a value judgment that is propositional. That is, the judgment is either true or false. I believe the judgment to be true not only because I have a pro-attitude in favor of Malala Yousafzai's way of life and a con-attitude against Osama bin Laden's way of life, as moral subjectivists might argue. Nor do I necessarily believe the judgment to be true because there has been an open or tacit agreement among members of my community and only my community about its truth conditions, as Harman seems to argue. Nor do I believe the judgment to be true only because it is contextually meaningful, as Velleman contends.

I believe the judgment to be true because I find it sufficiently justified, namely, justified beyond reasonable doubt. Ordinary people with relatively normal and reliable perceptual and belief systems who are reasonable and understand that the nature of harm is not necessarily context-dependent might accept the judgment as being sufficiently justified too.

Roughly speaking, one can describe reasonable persons as those who are intelligent, accept the value of coherence, and have properly functioning belief systems that typically aim

and are conducive to truth. A reasonable person justifiably accepts a belief or judgment "beyond reasonable doubt" if accepting it is more reasonable and justified than accepting its contrary. That is, there is presently sufficient evidence for the belief or judgment being probably true. Moreover, there is presently insufficient evidence for its contrary being probably true. It seems that ordinary people across the globe share such an epistemic capacity.

For example, there is presently sufficient evidence for the belief or judgment that "Malala Yousafzai is the youngest person who has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize." and there is presently insufficient evidence for its contrary, namely, that "Malala Yousafzai is not the youngest person who has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize." Of course, it is conceivable and therefore possible that Malala is not the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Perhaps the historical record is inaccurate regarding past recipients of the prize. But given the actual evidence available, it is justified beyond reasonable doubt that Malala is indeed the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

One, however, can challenge the meaning of term "better" in the value judgment, "Malala Yousafzai's way of life is better than Osama bin Laden's way of life." Yet one could argue that the term "better" means improving at least as much objectively innocent people's lives as any of its alternatives would or avoiding harming them as little as possible as any of its alternatives would despite probable contextual variations.

Malala Yousafzai, who has been awarded the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize, is devoting a significant part of her life to improve the life of children across the globe. In doing so, she has voluntarily put herself in harm's way to try to accomplish her worthy goal. Her campaign on behalf of promoting children's education, especially the education of young girls, is not only right but also admirable.

Unlike Malala, Osama bin Laden dedicated part of his life to a violent campaign trying to expel the alleged infidels from the Holy Land of Islam by indiscriminately targeting combatants and innocent noncombatants alike. Unlike Malala's actions that can be aptly described as admirable, his are morally suspect. He brought mayhem not only to the alleged infidels but also to members of his own Islamic community or *umma*. Even if those sympathetic to bin Laden were to argue on consequentialist grounds that bin Laden intended to harm the life of a few alleged enemies or infidels to improve the life of the many members of the *umma*, the result of his actions are contrary to such a questionable intention. Al-Qaeda's campaign of terror has killed or seriously harmed more Muslims than non-Muslims.[7]

Moral relativists are likely to deny that the above-mentioned comparative judgment has truth-value or moral import. They seem to assume that people's behavior is beyond moral evaluation from an agent- and context-neutral perspective. If the hypothesis supporting moral relativism were evidently true, people's behavior would necessarily be beyond moral evaluation from an agent- and context-neutral perspective. But people's behavior does not necessarily seem to be beyond moral evaluation from an agent- and context-neutral perspective. After all, we are able to transcend our parochial views by imagining ourselves in other people's situations. Therefore, the hypothesis supporting moral relativism is not evidently true.

Perhaps the hypothesis is not evidently false either. We might have insufficient evidence to determine whether the hypothesis is true or false. Still, we take people's accountability across cultures seriously depending on how their behavior affects other people's well-being, especially

---

[7] See, e.g., Yassin Musharbash, "Surprising Study On Terrorism: Al-Qaida Kills Eight Times More Muslims Than Non-Muslims," *Spiegel online*, December 03, 2009. Available from: http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/surprising-study-on-terrorism-al-qaida-kills-eight-times-more-muslims-than-non-muslims-a-660619.html. [Accessed 5/20/2015]. See also Dean Obeidallah, "Who's Killing Muslims?" CNN, January 15, 2015. Available from: http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/15/opinion/obeidallah-al-qaeda-hypocrisy/ [Accessed 5/20/ 2015].

those who are conceived of as objectively innocent. If so, we have reason to question on practical grounds the hypothesis supporting moral relativism.

The attitude of moral relativists is incompatible with the view of those who defend a universal minimal sense of shared solidarity based on an objective aversion to evil acts, especially manmade evil, regardless of where those acts occur. Our aversion to transcultural evil acts seems to depend on our moral imagination. That is, we seem to have a capacity to put ourselves in the position of those who might suffer the consequences of such evil acts. Innocent people who suffer the consequences of manmade evil acts might be incontrovertibly harmed. So despite moral relativists' concerns, the nature of harm need not be conceived of as being only context-sensitive.

Regardless of the challenge of moral relativists, there are some acts or practices that are seemingly beyond the pale, such as the practice of terrorism understood as the deliberate targeting of the objectively innocent, the torturing of people (especially the objectively innocent), the practice of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and the raping of individuals, especially when one deliberately adopts these acts or practices as a matter of policy. In light of these incontrovertible evil acts, moral relativists have a substantive burden of proof to provide convincing arguments to demonstrate that the predicates right and wrong or good and bad cannot necessarily have transcultural value.