Student Relativism and Other Issues

Professors who teach courses in ethics or moral philosophy tend to hear a familiar theme from their students each term. It usually expresses itself in statements like these:

“What is right or true for you, may not be right or true for me.”

“Many people disagree on what is morally right or wrong. So, there must not really be a moral right or wrong.”

“Who’s to say what’s right or wrong?”

“Right or wrong is just a matter of opinion.”

“I can’t judge whether what someone else does is right or wrong and no one else can judge my actions either.”

“How can you grade my opinion? I have a right to my own opinions.”

Background

Hopefully, soon after starting a course in ethics, these students learn that what they are advocating is ethical relativism, which denies that there are any universal ethical principles or standards that apply to everyone. Therefore, there is no way for anyone to judge another’s actions as morally right or wrong.

The alternative to ethical relativism is moral objectivism, which is the view that there are universal moral principles that have objective validity, whether or not people recognize them as such (objective meaning something that can be known, that exists apart from just thought or opinion.)

The problem is that most students don’t really believe in ethical relativism and they haven’t thought through the implications of the view.

For example, an ethical relativist could never judge anything as morally right or wrong, beyond his or her own behavior. To be more specific, the cultural relativist could never judge another society which chose to practice racism, oppression of women, slavery, genocide, or to start a nuclear war, or invade another country in order to expand its own borders. Similarly, the ethical subjectivist (one who holds to the individual variety of ethical relativism) would encounter the same issues on an individual or personal level. For example, an ethical relativist could not condemn a serial rapist or murderer. Most people, when faced with the reality of ethical relativism find that it leads to conclusions by which they are repulsed. Instinctively they recoil at the ramifications of such a view.

Student Relativism

Most often, the student statements presented earlier (and similar ones) actually reflect the influence of the popular trend in contemporary Western culture to resist judging or (perhaps more importantly) being judged by anyone. This has become so ingrained within the thinking of many people (especially youth) that they have difficulty thinking for themselves and critically analyzing any issue upon which their recognized peer group has made a judgment. There is a noticeable resistance to challenging conclusions or taking a stand on an issue and defending it with sound logical arguments.
Stephen Satris coined the term “Student Relativism” to describe the relativism espoused by college students which, according to him, is not a genuine philosophical position but a way of avoiding analysis of their opinions.

In his book, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, Louis Pojman describes an approach he uses in class:

In the opening days of my philosophy classes, I often find students vehemently defending subjective relativism – “Who are you to judge?” they ask. I then give them their first test. In the next class period, I return all the tests, marked “F,” even though my comments show that most of them are a very high caliber. When the students express outrage at this…, I answer that I have accepted subjectivism for marking the exams. “But that’s unjust!” they typically insist – and then they realize that they are no longer being merely subjectivist about ethics. Absurd consequences follow from subjectivism.

Now, if a student truly does subscribe to ethical relativism, accepts all of the ramifications, and consistently applies it, that is fine, as long as the student can defend the view and address the many criticisms leveled at it from ethicists who are in the moral objectivist camp. However, this does not let the student “off the hook” for understanding, explaining, defending, and applying the other ethical theories presented in the course. So, it’s definitely not the easy way out.

**Variety of Opinions ≠ No Truth**

Recall the student statement mentioned earlier, “Many people disagree on what is morally right or wrong. So, there must not really be a moral right or wrong.”

There are other variations of this which surface as well...

Regarding cultures, “Cultures and societies around the world all have different moral codes, so none of them can be right.”

Regarding the Bible, “Everyone has his or her own interpretation of what specific Bible verses mean and people are always saying, ‘God told me to do this,’ even when it’s something bad. So, the Bible can’t contribute to our moral thinking because there is no right interpretation.”

The last two assertions regarding cultures and the Bible are questionable (i.e., the diversity of views is not as prevalent or profound as some would have us believe). However, the underlying logic of these statements has a more serious flaw, which is quite easy to identify: the existence of diverse or conflicting opinions does not change the truth of a matter.

**Example 1:** Mary believes the concert starts at 7:00 p.m., but Jim is certain that it starts at 6:00 p.m. Jim argues strongly for a six o’clock start time and won’t back down. Each is confident that the other time is wrong. However, when they call the center where the concert is being held, they discover that the concert begins at 7:00 p.m. No matter how certain he was or how strongly he argued, Jim was still wrong.

**Example 2:** In a college algebra class, Mark says the answer to the equation is 27. Janet says the answer is 72. Both are certain. Both argue, trying to convince the other. The professor demonstrates how to properly work the equation, applying the mathematical principles taught earlier in the course. The actual answer is 50. Both students turn out to be wrong, despite how confident they were in their opinions.
Example 3: Until relatively recently (on the scale of human history), the majority of people believed the earth was flat and that the sun revolved around it. The few who believed otherwise were persecuted. Today, we find it obvious that the earth is round and that it revolves around the sun. Clearly the majority opinion, even an overwhelming majority, can be incorrect.

In each case, we see that a variety of conflicting opinions has no effect upon the truth. While there may be many strongly held views for which people argue vehemently, and even large groups that hold to particular views, it doesn’t disprove or change the truth of a matter. What if many people disagree on what is morally right or wrong? That doesn’t prove that there isn’t a moral right or wrong that can be discovered. What if some cultures/societies differ in their moral codes? Some could simply be wrong. Likewise, the fact that some people disagree on how to interpret the Bible (or anything, for that matter) doesn’t mean that there isn’t a correct interpretation that can be discovered with sufficient effort and study.

However, as mentioned earlier, even the premise upon which these student assertions are based – namely, that there is great diversity of opinion regarding these issues – is questionable. For example, while it is often assumed that cultures vary greatly in their moral principles, this variance may not be quite as great as is popularly believed.

E. O. Wilson, for example, has identified many common moral features among human cultures (see his On Human Nature, 22-23). Further, Clyde Kluckhohn (“Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non,” in Journal of Philosophy LII, 1955) writes:

> Every culture has a concept of murder, distinguishing this from execution, killing in war, and other “justifiable homicides.” The notions of incest and other regulations upon sexual behavior, the prohibitions upon untruth under defined circumstances, of restitution and reciprocity, of mutual obligations between parents and children – these and many other moral concepts are altogether universal. ¹

In regard to the Bible, it is obvious that people disagree on the interpretation of certain passages. Within Christendom, there have even been disagreements that have led to the formation of new denominations. However, anyone who studies the history of the Christian Church will find that while each denomination develops its own tradition (lowercase “t”), the Christian Tradition (uppercase “T”), which is commonly understood as “those things which have been held by nearly all Christians at all times and in all places” has remained remarkably consistent for more than 1,500 years in regard to the major, core, or essential features of the faith. In other words, the amount and significance of the disagreements regarding interpretation are much less than some in popular culture might have us believe.

The point of these last two pieces is simply to encourage you to ask questions, to look below the surface of popularly held beliefs, and to search out the truth of any matter for yourself before making a decision. It is always easier to simply accept “groupthink,” but the majority can be uninformed. It is far better to use your critical thinking skills to assess the soundness of each argument yourself and then to decide. You may find that this kind of original thinking allows you to make a more meaningful contribution to any group in which you find yourself.

¹ See Louis Pojman’s Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong, for more on this topic.
“You Can’t Judge My Opinion”

“How can you grade my opinion? I have a right to my own opinions.”

Do we all have a right to our own opinions? If by this we mean that a person has the ability to form an opinion about an issue, then sure.

But some opinions are better than others. Or let’s put it this way: some opinions are better informed and based on better reasoning than others. And they can be evaluated on that basis.

Recall “Example 1,” the concert disagreement, mentioned earlier. In that case, Mary’s opinion was better informed than Jim’s. She had accessed and remembered accurate information about when the concert was to start. She was correct. Jim was incorrect. As a result, Mary was better able to form an opinion on when they should leave to drive to the concert, when they should have dinner, and plan other events of the day. So, the accuracy and thoroughness of our information affects the quality of our opinions and all that follows from them.

Also, the soundness of our reasoning affects the quality of our opinions. As established earlier, deciding to be an ethical relativist simply because people differ in what they consider to be morally right or wrong is poor reasoning. There may be other reasons, more sound, which might influence one to become an ethical relativist, but diversity of opinion isn’t one of them.

So, can your professors judge or “grade” your opinions? Absolutely. In humanities courses, such as philosophy and ethics, we aren’t as concerned about your conclusions (e.g., whether in the end you decide to be a moral objectivist or ethical relativist; or whether you are for or against genetic engineering) as we are about how you got there – or, more specifically, whether your work reflects sufficient research (gathering of accurate and thorough information), a sufficient understanding of the philosophical views and theories presented in the course, and sound, logical reasoning (e.g., does your conclusion logically follow from your premises).

In all of this, it is important that students separate their ideas from themselves as people. This doesn’t mean that we aren’t formed by our ideas. But it does mean that we don’t take it personally when someone identifies a weakness in our thinking or challenges us.

Remember that someone who changes her mind in the face of rational argument has only proven herself to be rational, willing to learn, and grow. This is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength.