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Carlo Alvaro

CUNY New York City College of Technology

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The Incoherence of Moral Relativism

Abstract

This paper is a response to Park Seungbae's article, "Defence of Cultural Relativism". Some of the typical criticisms of moral relativism are the following: moral relativism is erroneously committed to the principle of tolerance, which is a universal principle; there are a number of objective moral rules; a moral relativist must admit that Hitler was right, which is absurd; a moral relativist must deny, in the face of evidence, that moral progress is possible; and, since every individual belongs to multiple cultures at once, the concept of moral relativism is vague. Park argues that such contentions do not affect moral relativism and that the moral relativist may respond that the value of tolerance, Hitler's actions, and the concept of culture are themselves relative. In what follows, I show that Park's adroit strategy is unsuccessful. Consequently, moral relativism is incoherent.

Keywords: Moral relativism; moral absolutism; objectivity; tolerance; moral progress

The Incoherence of Moral Relativism

Moral relativism is a meta-ethical theory according to which moral values and duties are relative to a culture and do not exist independently of a culture. Rather, each culture establishes its own values and duties, and therefore there is no ultimate, objective right or wrong. In Saudi Arabia polygamy is accepted, in the US it isn't. In India it is immoral to kill a cow, in Italy it isn't. Who is correct, the Saudi Arabians or the Americans, the Indians or the Italians? According to cultural relativism, since there is no ultimate standard of morality, neither culture is correct. It follows that it is not possible to say that one culture is morally superior to another. Thus, any act can be both right and wrong. For example, relative to a liberal culture, slavery is wrong; but relative to a non-liberal culture, slavery may be right. Again, which of the two cultures is correct? Neither is, according to a moral relativist. Consequently, slavery can both be right and wrong because it depends on the particular point of view of a particular culture. In addition, cultural relativism claims that we have to tolerate other cultures. That is to say, since no ultimate standard of morality exists, the moral relativist must not judge, but rather tolerate, other cultures. Furthermore, cultural relativism argues that moral progress does not occur in the sense that a moral change, say, from slavery to equality, implies moving toward an ultimate moral standard. Rather, change can happen within a culture, but it does not follow that there are ultimate, culture-independent standards of morality at which a culture aims or ought to aim.¹

One clarification is necessary from the outset. Park specifically uses the term *cultural* relativism to refer to *moral* relativism. This is certainly not an issue. Perhaps, his choice of terminology is to emphasize that morality is merely a cultural phenomenon. However, for the sake of clarity, by *cultural*, as opposed to *moral*, relativism it is typically intended no more than the notion that different cultures have different beliefs and practices. This view derives from the work of anthropologists such as William Sumner, Ruth Benedict, and Meville Herskovits. Cultural relativism is not the object of contention here. Cultural relativism differs from moral relativism, according to which moral judgment, value, and duties are culturally relative. In this paper, I use the term moral relativism instead of cultural relativism.

Also, it has to be noted that Park's rebuttal to the criticisms against moral relativism is based on Gilbert Harman's analogy between morality and Einstein's theory of relativity. (160) Specifically, motion is not absolute but relative to a particular reference frame. A train travels at 100 m/h with respect to the ground. A passenger onboard is also travelling at the same speed. However,

relative to the passenger, she may be sitting comfortably reading a newspaper, motionless, or walking to the bathroom at 2 m/h. Moreover, if we consider their speed relative to Earth orbiting around the sun, the train and the passenger are moving at the speed of 67,000 m/h. Relative to our solar system, they are moving around the center of our galaxy at approximately 490,000 m/h. Which is the correct speed? “Wrong question!” says the moral relativist. The right question is, “Relative to whom?” It would be arbitrary to say that one particular frame of reference is correct. Park argues that moral values are, like motion, relative to a particular frame of reference, which is the culture that does the valuing; and it would be arbitrary to say that one moral framework is better than or superior to another. In the following, I respond to Park’s rebuttals to various criticisms of moral relativism. As I will show, Park’s arguments do not succeed in defending moral relativism from the charge of incoherence.

Principle of Tolerance

A frequently touted principle of moral relativism is tolerance. The principle of tolerance simply states that it is a virtue of moral relativism to tolerate other cultures. Since no culture is ultimately right or wrong, the moral relativist acknowledges that his or her opinion about morality is neither superior nor inferior to the opinion of others. Consequently, it would seem that moral relativism endorses the principle of tolerance. Opponents of moral relativism point out that the very principle of tolerance undermines, rather than supports, moral relativism. That is, if a universal principle of tolerance should be upheld by moral relativists, then such a principle would have to be culturally independent—the possibility of which moral relativism denies. To be consistent, a moral relativist must argue that the principle of tolerance is not a universal principle, but rather a relative one. It has to be noted that Rachels (18), Stace (58), and others argue that the principle of tolerance is essential to moral relativism. In my view, and others (Wreen 331) moral relativism need not logically imply the endorsement of the principle of tolerance. At any rate, Park accommodates tolerance by arguing,

The principle of tolerance is also relative to a culture, so a tolerant act is moral in reference to a culture which agrees with it but is immoral in reference to another which disagrees with it... Thus, the cultural relativist does not have to require that the principle of tolerance be absolute. (Park 161)

Granted, the moral relativist need not endorse tolerance as an objective principle. However, while this strategy seems to remove an internal

inconsistency, it generates other problems. To say that the principle of tolerance is also relative to a culture amounts to saying nothing more than there is no tolerance, except to the extent that the individual decides to tolerate others. As we will see, in a later section that discusses the question of what exactly is a culture, Park states that any number of people can be a culture (164). Since Park concedes that an individual can be part of many different cultures, it follows that such relativistic tolerance boils down to some form of moral subjectivism. Subjectivism can encompass several views: that ethical statements are expressions of sentiments or personal preferences; or the view of Protagoras that “man is the measure of all things,” which can be intended as a form of egoism. Park here does not argue for moral subjectivism. However, the assertion that tolerance is also relative, in connection with the acknowledgement that each individual belongs to many different cultures, leads to this conclusion.

The fundamental problem with subjectivism—which also applies to relativism—is that subjectivism is self-refuting. If the subjectivist’s assertion of relativism is correct, the subjectivist must allow the assertion of subjectivism itself to be absolutely true. Suppose Park responds that subjectivism is true absolutely and all beliefs except subjectivism are true only relatively to the individual. This retreat does not save subjectivism. Aside from being ad hoc, once the subjectivist allows for the absolute truth in asserting subjectivism, it may well follow that there could be any other absolute truths besides relativism; and if there are, then subjectivism itself is absolutely false, because it denies that there are absolute truths except itself. Thus, either the moral relativist accepts tolerance as an objective principle, which undermines moral relativism, or he argues that tolerance is relative, but this leads to moral subjectivism, which is self-refuting.

Universal Moral Rules

Park notes that moral philosophers of all creeds agree that cultural relativism denies the existence of, as Park puts it, “universal” moral rules. Firstly, Park’s terminology is somewhat infelicitous. The term “universal” is a bit confusing. I prefer to use the term “objective.” Paying the subway fare is a universal rule, but it is not an objective rule. A rule is objective just if it transcends those who acknowledge it. In other words, objective moral values are values that exist independently of humans, while universal values can be values that humans choose to endorse universally. The fact that they are universal implies no ontological commitment in the sense that a rule or a moral principle can be accepted by all members of a culture or by members of different cultures.

However, their acceptance does not stem from the existence of human-independent values. Thus, the rule, “No smoking allowed” can be universal, meaning that all people must abide by that rule. However, it is not an objective rule that exists independently of humans.

Referring to the writings of Thomson, and Schick and Vaughn, Park points out that these authors believe in *universal* moral principles, such as “One ought not to torture babies to death for fun.” “Equals should be treated equally.” and “Unnecessary suffering is wrong.” (Park 161) Park then argues that the existence of universal moral rules does not undermine moral relativism because it is possible that *universal* moral rules exist insofar as they are rules shared by many cultures. According to Park, it is even possible that all cultures in the world shared the same moral values, but such unanimity would not stem from the existence of absolute moral values.

For the cultural relativist, a moral rule is universal not because it is in line with the absolutely right standard that transcends all cultures but because it is in line with all the cultures in the world. Cultural relativism does not have to preclude the possibility that all the cultures in the world jointly endorse some moral rules. (161)

The point, however, is not whether different cultures can have common moral values by convention. That’s evidently true. The question is about the ontological status of such values. Clearly, Park acknowledges the possibility that all the world cultures might jointly endorse the same moral values. However, he states that such unanimity would be purely relative. “Cultural relativism” he writes, “does not have to preclude the possibility that all the cultures in the world jointly endorse some moral rules.” (162) But how does he propose to explain that all cultures in the world endorse the same moral rules? Indeed, virtually all cultures in the world, despite their respective beliefs, approve of moral principles such as “unnecessary suffering is wrong or torturing babies for fun is immoral.” What is the best explanation for such unanimous agreement? If such agreement exists, it is, I argue, either due to chance, convention, or to necessity. It seems unlikely that it is due to chance. It could be due to convention; but on what is the convention based? Virtually all cultures in the world hold that torturing innocent babies for fun is immoral. If it were due to convention, any one culture could readily hold the opposite view on whether torturing babies for fun is moral, and thus the moral relativist would have an argument. But that is not the case. In fact, all culture categorically recognizes that torturing innocent babies for fun is immoral independently of what anyone thinks or believes. Consequently, it seems plausible that at least some values,

such as torturing babies for fun is immoral, are valid independently of what people think, believe, or decide. What follows, then, is that certain moral values are really *objective*.

People disapprove of torturing babies for fun because it is wrong—but torturing babies for fun is not wrong because people disapprove of it. Our moral experience that certain acts are really, objectively wrong and others objectively right is confirmed by the cross-cultural moral agreement about such right or wrong acts. It is not sufficient for the relativist to say that moral agreement might be due to just pure chance or convention. In order to demonstrate that, after all, these agreed upon moral principles are relative and that our moral experience of objective moral values is illusory, one would be required to present some compelling evidence to show that by pure chance all cultures approve or disapprove of the same principles. Such argument would have to show that our moral experience of objective moral value is unreliable. However, such argument would be based on premises that are less obvious and more controversial than the existence of objective moral values themselves. In the absence of a compelling argument that might show otherwise, the most plausible explanation to the fact that all people, excluding the sadist and the deranged, agree with the same moral principles is that such principles are independent of people's opinions. Thus, it is a rational position to hold that objective moral values and duties exist. No sensible person would ever hold that unnecessary suffering is morally good or permissible. To say that these deep-seated moral convictions are, in the end, relative just flies in the face of reason and in the face of our moral experience.

Was Hitler Right?

According to Park the answer can be yes and no. To be consistent, a moral relativist must hold that, since moral values and duties are culturally relative, there is no moral difference between Hitler's genocidal actions and, say, the actions of missionaries helping African children orphaned by the AIDS epidemic. Contra moral relativism, our common sense tells us that it is absurd to think that Hitler's misdeeds are morally equivalent to the loving acts of missionaries. Park bites the bullet: "...a cultural relativist would stand his ground, saying that Hitler's acts were moral with respect to the Nazi culture, and Mother Teresa's acts were moral with respect to non-Nazi culture." (162) According to Park, it is natural that Hitler's acts are immoral to us because our moral frame of reference is influenced by non-Nazi principles. At the same time, "Members of the Nazi culture would reject our judgment because their intuition

is predisposed to favor their own culture, and they are unconsciously using it in appraising non-Nazi culture.” (162) Furthermore, according to Park

[I]f Hitler had been a cultural relativist, he would not have attacked Jews in the first place because he would have believed that the German culture was no more correct than the Jewish culture. Moreover, his atrocious actions conform well to a cultural absolutist’s possible belief that the German culture was superior to the Jewish culture. It is not clear to me whether it is cultural relativism or absolutism that has more dangerous implications on our daily lives. (162)

To be precise, not all members of the Nazi party supported their own culture. There are numerous stories of members of the Nazi party, like Oskar Schindler, who saved the lives of thousands of Jews, or soldiers refusing to kill Jews (See Anderson 2014 and Kitterman 1988). Again, what is the best explanation of members of the Nazi culture refusing to allow injustice to be committed against innocent people? The most plausible explanation seems to be that those Nazi individuals who opposed Nazi morality felt that Hitler’s agenda was objectively monstrous and unjust, and thus objectively immoral. Indeed, it is precisely because these individuals were not moral relativists that they saved Jews. Had they espoused moral relativism, they would have agreed with their own cultural morality and allowed Hitler’s atrocities to be carried out—especially if we consider, as Park suggests, that tolerance is relative. On the contrary, those individuals recognized that what Hitler was doing was really, objectively wrong.

As Dónal P. O’Mathúna notes, during the Nazi era in Germany, as a result of Darwin’s evolutionary theory, the notion of “social Darwinism” and “survival of the fittest” was applied to human beings (O’Mathúna 3) Darwin’s theory showed that human beings were not specially created. Rather, they are animals that slowly evolved from an ape-like creature that existed several million years ago—that in its turn descended from a simple marine organism. Darwin’s theory, unfortunately, was enthusiastically adopted by the wealthy to justify capitalism as the best economic model because it is an exemplification of survival of the fittest. Furthermore, the eugenics movement started by Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton (1822-1911), was readily taken up and distorted into notions of racial superiority and racial hygiene by the Nazis. Moreover, Hitler was so fascinated by the writings of Nietzsche that he gifted Mussolini with the complete works of Nietzsche’s ideas of anti-egalitarianism, the warrior, the Superman, nihilism, and the will to power inspired Hitler to act the way he did. Did Hitler sorely misunderstand Nietzsche? In my view he did. But this is not

the time or the place to have such a discussion. The point is that Hitler committed his misdeeds on the basis of his relativistic worldview. Thus, contrary to Park's assertion, had Hitler been a moral objectivist, he would have recognized that genocide is morally wrong.

At all events, most sensible people would not say that Hitler was moral based on his frame of reference; rather, most people say that Hitler did what he did because he was a megalomaniac and or mentally deranged sadist (Coolidge, Davis, & Segal 3). But isn't what I am saying just an arbitrary judgment showing that morality is relative? I think not because those of us who think that Hitler acted immorally, besides having a moral experience to the effect that Hitler's acts were really immoral independently of what anyone might think, we also have good rational arguments independent of personal preference that can serve to show that Hitler was objectively wrong. If there were no objective moral values, moral statements could not be true. Then, arguing logically about morality would be impossible. Consider this argument:

1. Murder is the unlawful and malicious act of killing a human being.
2. Unlawful and malicious acts of killing a human being are morally wrong.
3. It follows that murder is morally wrong.
4. Hitler committed murder.
5. Therefore, Hitler is morally wrong.

This is a deductively valid and sound moral argument. The argument is sound independently of whether I or the moral relativist believes so. Given the premises, the conclusion follows by logical necessity, and thus the argument is formally valid. And since the argument is valid, and the premises are true, it is also sound. However, moral relativists cannot accept this because they argue (at least Park does) that a moral claim can both be true and false. But a statement cannot be both true and false without violating the law of non-contradiction.

The analogy with motion is not relevant here. Presumably, Park would point out that since morality, like motion, is relative to the observer, there is no one interpretation that is right or wrong. However, in the preceding argument, each premise is either true or false independently of which framework one uses. One could try to deny the intermediate conclusion 3., but this would be highly controversial as 3. follows from 2., which is virtually universally accepted, and thus hard to deny. Consequently, if relativism is true, then moral argumentation is not a possibility; but logical moral argumentation is possible, as the example above illustrates. This is obvious by the fact that one can present sound or cogent arguments in support or against certain moral facts. It is the very power

of sound and cogent argumentation that provides moral justification. It follows that moral statements can be true, and they are because they refer to objective standards of right and wrong. Consequently, Hitler's acts were immoral—objectively immoral.

On The Possibility Of Moral Progress

According to moral relativism, there are no absolutely right standards or absolutely wrong standards of morality. Considering my culture at present as an example, in the US most people regard slavery as a barbaric and immoral practice of the past, while they value freedom and equality. However, according to Park there is no moral difference between our past and present culture. In other words, it cannot be said that as a culture we've made moral progress. But isn't it obvious that morally speaking we are better off today than we were prior to the abolition of slavery? Isn't women's suffrage a clear example of moral progress? According to Park, the answer to both questions is "No." He writes,

A cultural relativist would admit that we moved toward equality as a result of the abolition of slavery, but he would deny that we moved toward the absolutely right standard. We may think that we are now closer to the absolutely right standard because equality is of absolute value. When we think so, however, we are using the present culture as our moral frame of reference which approves of equality. If we use the past culture as our moral frame of reference which disapproved of equality, we would have an opposite intuition that we are now farther from the absolutely right standard, and hence we made moral regress rather than progress. (Park 163)

There are a few problems with the above argument. Firstly, what exactly are "the past culture" and "the present culture"? Are we not talking about the same culture? And when does the old culture end and the new culture begin? It is more plausible to say that it is the same culture evolving morally. Secondly, if we take slavery as an example, it is obvious that many people who were part of the American culture in the past opposed slavery and thought that slavery was morally bankrupt from the start. How can a moral relativist explain these facts other than with the notion of moral progress? As Michael Huemer aptly puts it, "skeptics cannot explain the pervasive trend toward liberalization of values over human history, and that the best explanation is the realist's: humanity is becoming increasingly liberal because liberalism is the objectively correct moral stance." (Huemer 1)

Furthermore, I want to offer two arguments to show that moral progress occurs. According to Dale Jamieson, change does not necessarily indicate progress. In fact, something can change for the worse. It can only be called progress when an ensuing state is generally better than the original one (Jamieson 318). But the question is, “Better in what respect?” Here I propose a very simple thought experiment. If today’s equality and democracy were neither better nor worse than yesterday’s slavery and dictatorship, then one would have no qualms living in the past. But no one would ever live in the past, that is, one would never trade equality and democracy for slavery and dictatorship. Therefore, today’s achievements, such as equality and democracy, are morally better than, and morally superior to, slavery and dictatorship. And since better implies progress, it follows that equality and democracy are examples of moral progress. In other words, equality and democracy are paradigms of morality toward which past cultures moved.

My second argument is as follows: Social change may be due to technological, economic, aesthetic, or moral factors. If a change can be explained in terms other than moral factors, then such change is not due to moral progress. Abolition of slavery, for example, is not due to technological, economic, or aesthetic, factors. Technological, economic, and aesthetic factors might be involved in slavery. But they are not the driving factors for abolition of slavery. Therefore, abolition of slavery is a moral change. A moral change implies that the current states of affairs are not good or are not as good as they could or ought to be and thus must be changed at least for the better, but possibly for the best; the “best”, I take it, is a state of affairs characterized by total equality.

There are also a number of social changes. I want to classify such changes under four distinct headings, technological, economic, aesthetic, and moral. Examples of technological and economic changes are agricultural advancements such as irrigation, the plow, cotton gin, and more, which led to surplus food, population growth and urbanization. The process of moving from an agrarian-based economy, or even from a hunter-gatherer society, to an industrial or postindustrial economy can be explained in terms of improving productivity and consequently capital. The point is that there was nothing morally wrong about an agrarian-based society.

Similarly, in the past people used to wear hats as a protection against rain, dust, cold, and the sun. Due to several factors, including transportation, hygiene, and fashion, wearing a hat became less necessary and no longer fashionable. Once again, there is nothing morally wrong about wearing a hat. In fact, some

people wish to return to a time when people wore elegant clothes instead of sagging pants and basketball shoes. At any rate, the change from a hatted society to a non-hatted one does not imply that one is morally better than the other.

Now consider the abolition of slavery. Slavery was not abolished due to aesthetic factors, though one could argue that slavery creates a number of aesthetically negative externalities. But the reason slavery was abolished was due to slavery's immorality. The change from slavery to equality cannot be explained other than in terms of moral improvement from a morally bad situation to a morally good one. And this gradation implies that there is a paradigm of goodness against which we measure moral facts. In other words, slavery is the unjust owning of a human being by another human being. Also, slavery caused the enslaved unnecessary suffering. No one—not even the moral relativist—would deny this much. Thus, if we moved from slavery to equality, the best explanation is that a world that contains slavery is morally inferior to a world that does not contain slavery. Or, equality is morally better than slavery. And to say that one is inferior and the other superior implies the existence of absolute (objective) moral values. Unlike other social changes, the abolition of slavery implies that we have made moral progress toward a standard of morality that is objective. What's more is that even moral relativists, though consistency to their moral view may compel them to deny it, recognize that equality is better than slavery.

Any Act Can Be Made Moral

Moral relativism is internally inconsistent because it implies that any act can be made moral by forming a culture that accepts it. Park quotes Pojman saying, “[Ted] Bundy would be morally pure in raping and killing innocents simply by virtue of forming a little coterie.” (qtd. in Park 164). But Park bites the bullet, again: “A cultural relativist would cheerfully grant that any act can be made moral by forming a culture that approves of it.” (164) Yet again, his defense relies on the analogy between morality and the relativity of motion:

A car is traveling at 50km/h with respect to the ground. As long as you invoke a right frame of reference, the car can be said to be traveling at any speed you like. For example, it can be said to be moving at 30km/h, if you pick as a frame of reference a bicycle traveling at 20km/h with respect to the ground in the same direction. Regarding the same car, you can say that it is moving at 50km/h, 30km/h, etc. You can choose whatever velocity you like. You are right about the velocity of the car, insofar as you appeal to

a right frame of reference. The same is true of morality. You are right about the morality of a certain action inasmuch as you invoke a culture which commends it. For example, you can say that murder is right, but add that the action is assessed under the criminal culture which praises murder. (164)

As I indicated earlier, in order to support moral relativism, the moral relativist must show that our moral experience is not reliable; and to accomplish such a task he must present arguments whose premises must be more controversial than the notion that certain moral principles are objectively true. Park resorts to the claim that any act can be moral so long as a culture approves of it. Suppose that a culture was formed by the like of Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez, Joel Rifkin, Charles Manson, and others. It does not follow that murder would be moral because such a “culture” deems it so. But which moral frame of reference are we using to say that the culture formed by serial killers is wrong about murder? Couldn’t they say the same about us? Park implies that it depends on which frame of reference we use; or in other words, to say that one is more correct than another is purely arbitrary.

But is it just an arbitrary call? Not at all. Granted, each culture might have its own opinion. However, we can show through rational argumentation that the serial killers’ culture is morally wrong. We have compelling reasons to condemn such a culture. On the other hand, the serial killers’ culture does not have any rational reason to justify their position. They might just say that they enjoy killing innocent people or that killing innocent people gives them pleasure. Thus, we are in a position to judge such a culture as an immoral culture. As Mary Midgley points out, moral isolationism, a view that can be expressed by the question, “Who are we to judge?” is logically incoherent. (80-81) Firstly, if moral isolationism were correct, then it would be possible to praise and respect a culture without judging it. However, judgment is logically antecedent to respect. One judges a culture in order to respect it. Secondly, we are able to judge our own culture and ourselves precisely because we compare other cultures, and use them as a frame of reference, to judge our own. If we may not judge other cultures, then how do we expect to judge our own? This would imply the inability to judge any moral act that is blatantly absurd—such as a culture that deems murder and rape moral. Thirdly, cultures do not exist in a vacuum. Nowadays, cultures are completely intermixed. This means that by knowing other cultures, through our moral experience, and by the aid of sound reasoning, we are in a position to judge others and determine whether their acts are moral.

Furthermore, as others have pointed out, the analogy between morality and motion upon which Park constantly relies is a false analogy (Cornea 35). Firstly, Park does not provide any compelling reason as to why morality should be as relative as motion. Secondly, Park notes that a car's velocity is relative. If we use the ground as a frame of reference the car is travelling at 50 km/h; if we instead use a bicycle traveling at 20km/h as a frame of reference, then the car is travelling at 30 km/h. Of course, we can say that the car is travelling at 50 km/h and at 30 km/h and at many other speeds depending on the particular frame of reference used. However, imagine that a driver is travelling at 50 km/h on a road that has a limit of 40 km/h. It would be of no avail for the driver to try to get out of a speeding ticket by arguing that, with reference to a bicycle travelling at 20 km/h, he was travelling at 30 km/h—10 km/h under the speed limit!

The fact is that motion is relative. However, to say that motion is relative is merely emphasizing that motion is a mysterious notion. In other words, from our point of view it is relative. But it exists and our experience of motion is objective and has a meaning. Insofar as our experience of motion is meaningful, we don't measure the speed of cars in reference to bicycles or the speed of airplanes in reference to birds for good reasons. If one suggested that since motion is relative from our point of view, it is futile to have speed limits or measure the speed of a marathon runner or that a train is travelling simultaneously at different speeds—because in the end it's all relative—we would say that he is plain wrong. If he protested and asked what makes a frame of reference more correct than another, we might simply reply that while our measurements might vary, the fact is that motion is real and independent of our measurements. Furthermore, measuring speed the way a speed camera does is more sensible given our experience as humans. Similarly, with morality, we do not have to be lost in relativism because we can use reason and our moral experience of objective moral values and duties to determine that certain values are moral or immoral. We might measure morality differently, but it does not follow that moral values do not exist. Thus, just by asserting that any act can be made moral, it does not follow that any act can be moral. Moreover, it is false that no moral framework is more correct than another. For example, we have experiential and rational resources to show that the moral framework that values equality is superior to a moral framework that value slavery.

Moral Relativism Is A Vague Concept

According to moral relativism morality is relative to a culture. However, what exactly is a culture? How many members constitute a culture? When we

study different cultures, we learn that they are not uniform; rather, the people within the same culture have disparate views and, often, contradictory views. Since it is not clear how many people are required to count as a culture or a society, cultural relativism is vague. Park argues that this is not a serious problem.

[A] cultural relativist could conjure up again the relativity of motion. We can group a tree, a road sign, and a rock together, and say that a car is traveling at 50km/h in relation to that group of the objects. How many objects are required in order for the group to serve as a frame of reference? The answer is obvious. Any number of objects can do. Even million objects can constitute a single frame of reference. The same is true of morality. Any number of people can constitute a culture. (Park 164)

The moral relativist need not be committed to a specific number of individuals as the paradigm of a culture. However, there are a few problems with this philosophical stand. First of all, just because any number of people can constitute a culture, it does not follow that morality is relative to that culture. Thinking that something is the case does not make it the case. As we have seen in the previous discussion, a group of serial killers could form a culture and endorse a value of killing people for fun. This however, in no way demonstrates that morality is relative. Again, here the analogy between morality and the relativity of motion does not really help. True, any number of objects could serve as a frame of reference to assert that a car is travelling at 50 km/h. However, the fact remains that there is a car travelling. In other words, following this analogy, the number of people that constitute a culture may vary, but moral values are still objective. At any rate, the main worry with Park's characterization of cultural relativism is that it eventually collapses down into some form of moral subjectivism. Since Park does not explicitly endorse subjectivism, I will refrain from addressing it. However, if that were the case, subjectivism is notoriously incoherent.

Furthermore, Park points out that the same criticism of the vagueness of moral relativism when it comes to the number of people needed to constitute a culture, applies to cultural absolutism:

Recall that cultural absolutism says that there is the absolutely right standard transcending all "cultures." Note that the concept of culture also figures in the formulation of cultural absolutism. A cultural absolutist is faced with a similar challenge: How large must

a group be in order to constitute a culture that is transcended by the absolutely right culture transcends? (166)

Aside from the fact that Park here commits the so-called “you too” fallacy, the concept of culture need not—in fact it does not—figure in the formulation of moral absolutism as Park asserts. Moral absolutism is the notion according to which there are moral principles by which all peoples’ actions may be judged. Kant’s deontology, for example, is a form of moral absolutism. But one can be a moral realist and argue that our experience informs us of objective moral values and duties. By objective, it may be pointed out, it is meant that such values and duties are independent or that they exist independently of the opinions and preferences of humans. Objective moral values exist whether we like it or not. In other words, the question of how many people are needed to constitute a culture that is transcended by moral values is completely irrelevant because the moral absolutist or realist just claims that moral values exist, period. Conversely, it is the moral relativist the one postulating that morality is relative to a culture, and thus it is he—not the moral absolutist—who needs to deal with the question of what constitutes a culture.

Belonging To Two Cultures

According to moral relativism, morality is culturally relative. But what is a culture? Most people belong to many cultures at once. For example, which moral values should a raw vegan, homosexual, Catholic, African-born, American-naturalized, classical musician, heavy metal aficionado man endorse? He belongs to different cultures at the same time, which often advocate conflicting moral values. As Pojman points out, “Relativism would seem to tell us that where he is a member of societies with conflicting moralities he must be judged both wrong and not-wrong whatever he does. (Pojman 18). Park attempts to explain away this paradox:

Suppose, for example, that Mary is an American citizen and Christian, and that she had an abortion. The American law condones it, but Christianity prohibits it...A cultural relativist would again ask us to reflect upon the relativity of motion. Suppose that a car is in motion with respect to the ground. In such a situation, the driver is both in motion and at rest...The driver is in motion with respect to the ground but is at rest with respect to the passenger. The same is true of morality...Mary’s abortion is moral in relation to the American culture but is immoral in relation to the Christian culture. (Park 165)

However, the fact that “American law condones” Mary’s abortion does not mean that abortion is moral. The law, American or Brazilian, condones many things that are morally questionable. The ground for “condoning” abortion in the US is the right to privacy. Specifically, the 14th Amendment prohibits states from depriving a person of liberty without due process. Thus, a woman has the right to end a pregnancy without undue interference from the government because the right to liberty comprises the right to make decisions about family and the right to bodily integrity. On the other hand, although scriptures are not precise about abortion, Christians in general deem abortion as an immoral act. This, however, does not prove that moral relativism is true. And consequently, it does not follow that one can be wrong and not wrong at the same time.

The morality of abortion is too complicated an issue to explain here. Suffices to say that generally speaking moral disagreement over abortion is not due to the relativity of moral values, but rather the relativity of belief. That is, Christianity, for example, teaches that a fetus is a person; persons are inherently valuable because God made them; destroying the life of a person is immoral; abortion destroys a fetus; therefore, abortion is immoral. Christianity, of course, allows for exceptions when abortion is performed to save the life of a woman. On the other hand, those who are for abortion either do not believe that a fetus is a person or, even if they do, they may argue that a fetus has no special intrinsic worth. However, it is hardly the case, for example, that different cultures disagree over whether “killing innocent people” is wrong (Simpson 4).

Park’s argument shows only that people have different opinions. The law permits abortion, Christianity deems it immoral. This is hardly a revelation. His argument, however, does not show that Mary is right and wrong at the same time. Two individuals may have different opinions on whether the Empire State Building is in Paducah or whether it is in New York City. But the objective fact is that it is in New York City. One is right the other is wrong. Similarly, it does not follow that abortion is moral and immoral at the same time. In fact, American legislators and Christians both agree that deliberately killing innocent people is objectively wrong. Either a fetus is a person or not. If it turned out that it is, and the morality of abortion depends on this fact, the fact that different individuals have different beliefs about abortion does not make Mary right and wrong at the same time. In such a case, she would be wrong—objectively wrong.

Again, here Park invokes the analogy of motion. The example of a car in motion is not helpful. A car is moving using the road as reference frame, though the driver is not using himself as a reference frame. However, it would be hard

for the driver to deny that he is driving a car that is, in fact, moving. The fact is that motion is occurring. How we measure the speed of the car is not relevant here. The point is that from the reference frame of the driver the car is moving. From the point of view of a bystander the car is moving. From the point of view of a tree the car is moving. From the point of view of roadkill the car is moving. From the point of view of the universe the car is moving. If morality is like motion, it does not follow that it is relative. The way we measure motion is relative, but not that there is motion is a relative fact. By analogy, cultures measure moral acts differently, but it does not follow from this that there are no objective moral values.

Now, Park asks, “Which culture should Mary choose when she contemplates whether to have an abortion or not?” (Park 165) The one that is right, it may be answered. It may be argued that Mary is epistemically defective, in the sense that it might be difficult for Mary to know how to act. But her ignorance regarding the correct course of action does not preclude the possibility of there being objective moral values. Park writes,

If Mary is interested in her future as a Christian, she can choose Christianity as her frame of reference. If she is interested in her future as an American, she may choose the American culture as her frame of reference. In short, our interest determines which culture we choose as a standard when we appraise a human conduct. (166)

Suppose that in addition to being a Christian, Mary is a naturalized US citizen native of Moldova, a feminist, an anarchist, and a single mother who lives in New York City. Assuming that she is interested in her future as an American, which aspect of her being an American is her guiding force? Considering that the majority religion in the US is Christianity (70.6% according to Pew Research Center, 2019), wouldn't Mary's interest in her future as an American involve being a good Christian? Recall our hypothetical killers' culture. Such a culture deems that killing innocent people is moral. Virtually all sensible people regard such an act as immoral. Is it true that our interest determines which culture is right? I think not. We can show, irrespective of our interests, and on the basis of sound logical reasoning, that the killers' culture is objectively wrong. So, it is not true that our interest determines “which culture we choose as a standard when we appraise a human conduct.” We do not choose, for example, to refrain from torturing innocent babies for fun out of interest. We choose not to do so because torturing innocent babies for fun is objectively immoral.

Conclusion

If the arguments presented in this paper are sound, I have shown that Park's rebuttal to the standard objections against cultural relativism fails. It fails because moral relativism is incoherent. Thus, it's no wonder most moral philosophers do not regard moral relativism as a viable doctrine in ethics.

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¹ There is a vast literature on moral relativism that meticulously exposes the flaws of moral relativism (See Kreeft 1999; Moser and Carson 2000; Garofalo 2013). Thus, this paper is not meant as another in-depth critique, but rather as a response to Park Seungbae’s particular rebuttal to criticisms of moral relativism.