

# Is Morality Relative?

Michael Garnett

*Birkbeck College, University of London*

## 1. Confessions

I used to be a moral relativist—I used to think that moral judgements could be true or false only relative to a culture. Not just that: I used to think that moral relativism was *obviously true*. I struggled to understand how anyone could *not* be a moral relativist. Denying moral relativism, I thought, meant thinking that you were in possession of the one, true, universal, objective morality—and who could be so arrogant as to think they had *that*? I mean, *maybe* if you were religious you might think you had that. But even then, there are many different religions, and religious teachings require interpretation; and so who could be so arrogant as to think that they, out of everyone in the world, had hit on the one true interpretation of the one true religion?

My mother is a social anthropologist, someone whose job it is to study different cultures, and growing up I was keenly aware of the huge differences in moral ideas and outlooks between different human societies. As a kid I'd sit through dinner parties listening to my mum and her anthropology friends swapping stories about the distant peoples with whom they'd lived: the things they'd had to eat (live grasshoppers and stewed goat's placenta were particular standouts), the different kinds of family structures they'd been welcomed into, and the different ideas about ethics and the cosmos that they'd learned about. For as long as I can remember, then, I've known that the ideas *I* happen to have about things like property, marriage, suicide, homicide, incest, cannibalism, the natural world, and so on, are mostly just local to me and to my little corner of the world.

So how could I *not* have been a relativist? Perhaps I could have believed in a universal, objective morality if I'd been ignorant of the extent of these

cultural differences—if I’d somehow thought that everyone in the world shared more or less the same moral ideas as me and the other white, middle-class Londoners in my neighbourhood. But I *wasn’t* ignorant: I had a front row seat at the theatre of human cultural diversity. So to believe in a single true morality I would have had to believe, arrogantly, that somehow *I* (along with the rest of my ‘tribe’) had some special access to the moral truth, a special access denied to everyone else on the face of the planet. What could possibly justify this? After all, it’s simply an accident of birth that I grew up to have the moral ideas that I have. Had I instead grown up on a Fijian island, or deep in the Amazon basin, or in rural China, I would have had an utterly different moral outlook. Clearly, I had no better claim to the moral truth than anyone else. And that’s why I thought moral relativism was obviously true.

But I’m not a moral relativist any more. So what happened? What happened is I studied philosophy. Philosophy showed me that I was muddled about what exactly did and didn’t follow from these facts about cultural diversity and disagreement, and it helped me to see everything more clearly. I eventually came to understand that, of the various things I thought about this topic, some of them were correct, but weren’t moral relativism; and some of them were moral relativism, but weren’t correct.

It took me a few years to get this all straightened out in my head. What you’re reading now is my attempt to pass some of this on, to give you a shortcut through the thicket. This is the essay that I wish *I’d* been able to read after sitting through those anthropology dinners, my head spinning vertiginously at exotic tales of cultural difference.

## **2. Nobody’s Perfect**

So what did I learn? One of the most important things was this: that believing in a single objective true morality doesn’t mean that you must also think that you’re the final authority on what it contains. Morality needn’t be any different from anything else on this score. We all make mistakes, we all get things wrong (sometimes *badly* wrong), everyone is fallible, and no one can speak with final, absolute certainty about anything, morality included. To think that there’s an objective morality, you needn’t think that you can never

be wrong about it. (In fact, to think that you *can* be wrong about it, you maybe *have* to think that there's an objective morality—or otherwise there isn't anything to be wrong *about*. I'll come back to this later.)

All of this flows from a basic distinction that's enormously important not just for ethics but also for philosophy as a whole. It's the distinction between, on the one hand, *the nature of reality itself* and, on the other hand, *our knowledge of that reality*; or, more briefly, between *metaphysics* and *epistemology*. Let me first try to illustrate this with a non-moral example: the existence of God.

Here's one question: *Does God exist?* This is a metaphysical question. It's a question about the nature of reality itself. Now, here's another question: *Can we know whether God exists?* That's an epistemological question. It's a question about the nature or possible extent of our knowledge. And these are very different questions. They have independent answers. If God exists, then he exists whether we know it or not. And if he doesn't, then he doesn't exist even if people think they know that he does. The existence of God is an objective matter—either God's up there in the heavens or he isn't—and it doesn't depend on what we think or what we know. God's existence (or non-existence) is the objective state of the world that we're trying to discover.

The same applies to morality. One question is: *Is there a single objective morality?* That's a metaphysical question, a question about the nature of reality itself. Another question is: *What can we know about this objective morality?* That's an epistemological question, a question about what we can know. Just because you think there's a single objective morality doesn't mean you think you know everything, or even anything, about it. Of course, if you believe in a single objective morality then you've probably got some ideas about what you think it involves. But you needn't be very sure about this, and you certainly needn't think you can never be wrong.

This is a view that philosophers call *fallibilism*: the view that our ideas and beliefs might be mistaken. You can be a fallibilist about all kinds of things. For instance, you could be a fallibilist about science: you could think that even our best scientific theories might be mistaken. (Nearly everyone, and

definitely all scientists, are fallibilists about science.) Similarly, you could be a fallibilist about morality: you could think that even our best moral theories might be mistaken. The crucial point is that being a fallibilist about morality needn't make you an anti-objectivist or a relativist. It's possible to think *both* that there's one true objective morality *and* that we're often mistaken about what it consists in. To be an objectivist about morality, you don't have to arrogantly assume that you know all the moral truths.

In fact, it's pretty difficult to be a fallibilist about morality *without* being an objectivist. Suppose that I, an objectivist, say: 'I think that abortion is morally permissible; but I might be wrong'. What do I mean? What I mean is this: first, that there's an objective morality; second, that my best guess is that this objective morality tells us that abortion is morally permissible; and, third, that it might not—that for all I know it might, in fact, tell us that abortion is morally wrong. Now suppose that you, a moral relativist, say: 'I think that abortion is morally permissible; but I might be wrong'. What do *you* mean? Well, you *can't* mean that you think that objective morality might in fact tell us that abortion is morally wrong—because you don't think there *is* an objective morality! So what then? Maybe you mean that you think *most people in your culture think that* abortion is morally permissible, and that you might be wrong about what they think. But then you're not really admitting to the possibility of a *moral* mistake after all. You're just admitting to the possibility of a *sociological* mistake. The problem is that if there's no objective moral standard to test your moral claim against, then there's nothing that it can really mean for that claim to be right or wrong. This is, of course, part of the moral relativist's whole point: that there's no such thing as 'objectively right' and 'objectively wrong'. But, if so, then not only can you not say '*I'm objectively right*'; you also can't say '*I might be objectively wrong*'. Each is as meaningless as the other. In order to be wrong, there must be something to be wrong *about*—and that means (perhaps) that there must be some kind of objective morality.

### **3. Toleration and Respect**

So rejecting relativism doesn't mean thinking yourself morally infallible. Nor, I also came to understand, does it mean thinking that you're justified in

imposing your own moral views on others against their will. Moral relativism doesn't have a monopoly on toleration and respect for other cultures. In fact, counterintuitively, moral relativism often gets in the way of toleration. This is the second thing philosophy taught me to see more clearly about this topic.

Let's take an example. Suppose that I think that polygamy (that is, the practice of having two or more husbands or wives at the same time) is morally wrong. Suppose that someone else (let's call her *Beth*) lives in a place where people practice polygamy and, like the majority of people in this place, doesn't think there's anything wrong with it. Suppose further that I believe in a single, objective moral truth. So, presumably, I think that it's an *objective fact* that polygamy is morally wrong, and I think that Beth is just *in error* about this. That seems disrespectful of her and her culture. Even more worryingly, it seems that I would therefore be justified in intervening in her culture and trying to stop the polygamy, possibly by force. (After all, didn't I just say (for the purposes of this example) that I think polygamy is *objectively* morally wrong?)

By contrast, a moral relativist could be able to argue that Beth and I are *both* right: that polygamy is morally wrong for me (relative to my culture) but morally permissible for Beth (relative to hers). Moral relativism therefore seems to offer a more tolerant, 'live and let live' approach to these kinds of disagreements. Indeed, moral relativism arose in Europe partly as a *reaction* to an earlier colonial perspective, according to which the moral codes of other cultures were considered inferior to the supposedly correct moral attitudes of the Europeans, and therefore in need of changing (if necessary, at gunpoint). In this context, moral relativism played an important *anti-Imperialist* role by denying that any one culture was inherently better than any other.

But you don't need to be a moral relativist to be able to challenge these sorts of racist colonial attitudes. I can think that I'm correct about polygamy, and that Beth is wrong, without thinking that I therefore have any right to impose my views on her against her will. For instance, I might think that *in addition* to telling us that polygamy is morally wrong, objective morality *also* tells us

that we must tolerate and respect other people and their cultures. Put differently: the problem with the forcible imposition of European values on other cultures might be that it is intolerant and disrespectful and coercive and unjust—where these are objective moral facts about colonialism.

What's more, moral relativism can actually make it *more* difficult to criticise these sorts of colonial attitudes. That's because most 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europeans believed that they were justified in imposing their 'superior' values onto their 'backward' colonial subjects. So, *relative to their culture*, it was *right* for them to do this. Far from helping to show what's wrong with forcibly imposing your views on someone else, therefore, moral relativism can end up justifying it. This suggests that in order to condemn 19<sup>th</sup> Century European colonial attitudes, we need to do so from *outside* 19<sup>th</sup> Century European culture—and that, in turn, suggests again that we may need some kind of objective moral standard.

#### **4. Context Is Everything**

If morality *isn't* relative, it must be *universal*: instead of applying only to certain people in certain places at certain times, moral truths must apply to *all* people in *all* places at *all* times. But, the relativist might ask, what moral truths could possibly have this kind of universal application?

This problem is especially serious if we think of morality as a collection of simple rules, such as 'Do not steal', 'Do not kill', and so on. It just doesn't seem credible that rules like this could really apply to all people at all times. Indeed, we can all think of contexts or circumstances in which rules like this have exceptions. Take 'Do not steal', for instance. This seems like a pretty good moral rule as applied to you or I standing in a clothes shop thinking about shoplifting. But if someone were lost and starving in the wilderness, and she came across an empty and deserted cabin, would it really be wrong for her to go inside and take a tin of beans from the cupboard, if this would save her life? We might say: the moral rule 'Do not steal' doesn't apply to a starving person out in the wilderness, even though it does apply to us in a clothes shop. Or that it's true for us, but not true for her. And that, presumably, is moral relativism.

Here's another example of the same kind of thing. Suppose that you visit a distant culture, and you find out that they practice cannibalism. Not just that: you find out that *they eat their own parents*. (They don't kill their parents; they just eat them once they're already dead.) Pretty horrifying, right? If you asked around in our culture, I'd expect that almost everyone would agree that *eating your own dead parents* is morally wrong. But suppose that, as you get to know these people better, you also come to understand more about this practice. You learn that, for them, eating someone is a sign of enormous respect. You find out that they believe that by eating someone, by literally taking their flesh into your body, you enable them to live on through you, and you give them further life. You see that this is something they do as part of their funeral ceremonies, and that it has great cultural and emotional significance for them. Eventually, you're not quite so horrified by it. (I don't mean it's something you'd think about doing yourself—just that you can start to understand a bit why *they* do it.) Now, consider the following abstract moral question: 'Is it morally permissible to eat your own dead parents?' Well, it depends. In the context of *our* cultural beliefs and ideas, it almost certainly *is* wrong (if someone did that here, we'd be in *Silence of the Lambs* territory). In the context of these *other* cultural beliefs and ideas, though, it maybe *isn't* wrong. So the answer to this question depends on your culture.

And that's just moral relativism, right? Well, no. Not in the way that term is normally understood. Specifically, accepting this needn't require anyone to give up the idea that there is one true objective universal morality. All it requires us to give up is the idea that morality consists in simple rules. And that's something we should give up anyway. Morality isn't simple; it's highly complex. The morality of an action depends on all sorts of subtle factors, including the motivations and beliefs of the person acting, the circumstances in which they act, the likely further effects of their action, and so on. All of this and more has to be taken into account when making moral judgements. But that doesn't mean that the standards we use to make such judgements, and the judgements themselves, aren't *objective*. It just means that they're complicated, and sensitive to context.



Once we accept that morality is complex, we'll no longer expect it to give us simple, universal rules like 'It's wrong to steal'. We'll expect it to give us more nuanced, particular judgements like 'It's wrong to steal clothes from a shop when you already have plenty of clothes' and 'It's permissible to steal unwanted food to save yourself from starvation'. (Even these still aren't nuanced and particular enough—they themselves are open to exceptions—but you get the idea.) And there's no reason to think that *these* more specific judgements can't be utterly objective and universal. *These* judgements (or more specific versions of them) might apply to all people in all places at all times: for instance, to *anyone* lost in the wilderness, regardless of time and place.

So this isn't yet moral relativism. To distinguish it from relativism, philosophers call it *contextualism*. It's the idea that moral judgements must always take into account the particular context of their subject matter. Looking back, many of the anthropologists I grew up listening to over dinner weren't really relativists, but contextualists. Their main worry was about people blundering into foreign cultures, taking one look at the local practices, and forming strong moral judgements about them based only on simple rules derived from their own unexamined cultural ideas and beliefs. But you don't need the idea that there's no objective moral truth or that morality is relative in order to explain what's wrong with this. You only need the ideas that moral judgement must be sensitive to context, and that it normally takes a lot of time and effort to understand a foreign culture.

## **5. It's Personal**

So here, at its most basic, is what philosophy taught me about relativism: that the reason I thought moral relativism was obviously true was that I didn't actually understand the alternatives. I thought that if you weren't a moral relativist, then necessarily you believed in some kind of universal objective ethics; and that if you believed in a universal objective ethics, then necessarily (1) you thought you knew all the answers, (2) you thought you were entitled to impose your beliefs on others, and (3) you thought that moral rules just applied everywhere regardless of local context. I now know that none of this is true. Moral objectivism doesn't commit you to *any* of these



things. You can believe that morality is objective without thinking that you're the final authority on all moral questions (just as you can believe that science is objective without thinking that you're the final authority on all scientific questions). You can believe that one of morality's objective requirements is toleration and respect for others. And you can believe that morality yields judgements that depend on the particular circumstances of a given case, and that they are no less objective for that.

Here's another thing I learned. When I was younger, I assumed more or less that all reasonably intelligent, worldly people were moral relativists. (How could they not be?) But I then discovered that at least out of *philosophers*—the very people whose job it is to think carefully about these questions—virtually *no one* is a moral relativist. Moreover, this isn't because every philosopher believes in an objective morality. Far from it. It's because moral relativism isn't the only theoretical option, even for those who reject objectivism. Indeed, there are plenty of philosophers who completely reject the idea that moral judgements can be objective, but almost none of them are relativists.

How so? Well, it's all very well rejecting the idea that morality is objective. But this just leads to another issue, which is what people are up to when they make moral claims and act on the basis of moral judgements. If there's no objective morality, then *what on earth are they doing?* Relativists have an answer to this, which is that people are talking about and acting on moral ideas that are true (or false) relative to their own cultures. But that's not the only possible answer. Some philosophers think that people aren't really talking about anything, but are instead just expressing their own personal subjective feelings. This view is called *expressivism*. Others think that people *are* talking about objective morality—there just isn't any objective morality actually out there, so they're making a mistake, like when people used to talk about witches or dragons. This is the *error theory*. (There are other theories too.)

All of these theories—relativism, expressivism, error theory—share the idea that there's no objective morality, but they disagree over what, in that case,

people are actually doing when they engage in moral practices. And relativism isn't a popular option, even among anti-objectivists.

Why not? Let's look a bit more carefully at the moral relativist's distinctive idea. This is that moral claims *can* be true and false, but only relative to different cultures. So, for example, 'stealing is wrong' might be *true* relative to modern English culture, but *false* relative to some other culture. This means that, if I'm a member of the one culture—if I'm a modern Englishman—then 'stealing is wrong' is true for me, whereas if you're a member of the other culture then it's false for you. But what *is* a culture? Where does one culture end, and another one begin? For example, are England and Scotland different cultures, or are they parts of the same culture? (Or London and Yorkshire? Or East London and West London?) Relatedly, how do you know which culture you belong to, and so which moral claims are true for you? I'm English and Cuban and Russian and American. When these conflict, who decides which morality applies to me? And what about disagreement *within* cultures? Not everyone in England (or in rural China or in the Amazon basin) shares the same moral code. So what then does it mean exactly to say that some moral judgement is 'true relative to English (or Chinese or Amazonian) culture'? Who decides what is true relative to a given culture?

The root problem here is that cultures aren't always discrete, homogenous, easily categorisable entities. (In fact, many anthropologists nowadays don't even use the term 'culture'.) What's more, cultures aren't the only determinants of our moral identities. Our moral outlooks are shaped not only by our cultures but also by our positions within them, like our class, gender, race, sexual orientation, disability status, and so on. Indeed, not all moral relativists are *cultural* relativists. For example, some Marxists think that moral claims are true and false relative to different *social classes*, and others have thought the same about a wide range of other factors. All of this leads to the thought that morality isn't relative only to culture, but to *all* of these things (after all, picking out just one category over the others would be pretty arbitrary). But what happens then, as we go down this road of pulling more and more demographic categories into our relativist theory, is that we

gradually move away from the idea that moral claims are true and false relative to different *groups*, and towards the idea that moral claims are true and false relative to different *individuals*. At that point, ‘this is true for me’ stops meaning anything very different from just ‘this is what I think’. And so we seem to lose sight of the distinctive, central idea of relativism—that moral judgements are true and false relative to different groups—and end up just with the idea that different people have different moral beliefs, something we already knew.

In short, while moral relativism seems to lead to all sorts of problems about how exactly to define the relevant groups, and how to decide which moral claims are true relative to which groups, other kinds of anti-objectivism don’t. And that’s one of the main reasons why even anti-objectivist philosophers tend not to be relativists. (Or course, both expressivism and error theory have problems of their own—but that’s a story for another time.)

## **6. Concluding Thoughts**

If I were to go back in time and give philosophical advice to my past self, it would be this. First, take very seriously the idea that there might be a single, universal, objective morality—that idea’s not nearly as ridiculous as you think. Second, if after careful reflection you conclude that morality really *isn’t* objective, then consider adopting some other kind of anti-objectivism in place of relativism. It may save you a lot of trouble.

Unfortunately, I’ll never be able to give this advice to its intended recipient. But I hope, at least, some of it has been useful for you.