

## 6. Is moral relativism a good explanation of the existence of widespread moral disagreement?

I argue that under one interpretation of the word ‘disagreement’ (divergent moral views), moral relativism does give a good account; and under another interpretation of the word (our practice of disagreeing with each other), it doesn’t. I shall begin by giving the standard definition of relativism, along with a quick discussion of what moral disagreement looks like and where we find it. I then suggest relativism gives a good account of the existence of the disagreements I initially discussed (i.e. our divergent moral views). From there, I consider the central objection, namely that I have misconstrued the meaning of ‘disagreement’: ‘disagreement’ means the active process of moral views put in conflict and argued for, not the mere fact of the existence of the divergent views. Moral relativism, as this objection rightly points out, doesn’t well account for the character of moral disagreement: per relativism, it seems if you and I disagree over (i.e. have divergent views on) some moral issue, we aren’t ‘disagreeing’ in a different sense of that word—that is, neither of us must be wrong—we seem to be merely talking past each other. While I mention several rejoinders the relativist could make to such a point, I accept the thrust of this, central objection: relativism doesn’t give a good account of how moral disagreement feels to the participants—our practice of disagreeing. Thus, I conclude that insofar as ‘disagreement’ means ‘the fact of divergent views’ moral relativism gives a good account; and insofar as ‘disagreement’ means ‘our practice of disagreeing’, it does not.

First, what is moral relativism? There are several theses generally associated with the position, although only one is relevant. The relevant claim is the metaethical one, which says there exist no objective moral truths.<sup>2</sup> Contra error theory and non-cognitivism, moral judgements are neither all false nor non-truth-evaluable. Relativism allows there are many moral frameworks, and a moral judgement is true or false in light of a particular framework. There are various versions of relativism: frameworks relative to each individual or to a society; relative to the actor’s framework or the appraiser’s; or the framework the agent does have or the one she would have under conditions of complete information or rationality etc. While such distinctions are important in some discussions, in what follows I understand relativism quite generally.

A classic argument for moral relativism flows from the existence and character of divergent moral views—the very thing the prompt may seem to be asking about per the term ‘disagreement’, though in this paragraph I merely consider the argument and do not attempt to answer the prompt. It seems apparent, *prima facie*, that there is significant moral disagreement (in the divergent views sense of the word), both between societies and within a society. The ancient Greeks (by and large) believed in the acceptability of slavery; we don’t; many countries today believe in the acceptability of limiting women’s rights, we—in this country—don’t, etc. Within societies, disagreements remain: I value the liberty to raise my children how I wish; my friend

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<sup>2</sup> The other two (irrelevant) classic relativistic theses are as follows. Descriptive moral relativism simply asserts that widespread moral disagreements exist. The prompt already assumes this, so it isn’t helpful to discuss. The second thesis—usually not associated with philosophers—is one about ‘tolerance’ we ought to show to those who morally disagree with us. The prompt doesn’t ask about this.

hopes society will play a role in shaping his children. The list of moral disagreements goes on. So, it seems clear there is considerable moral disagreement. But the same is true in science, for example, and scientific relativism seems intuitively implausible. The next claim that the relativist characteristically puts forward is that moral disagreements are of a particularly intractable kind: we have these divergent moral views, and even though we discuss and argue about them, the views persist in being divergent. Scientists, in contrast, may disagree, but they experiment and usually over time converge on a view of a particular thing, before moving on to the next disagreement. Moral views do not always or characteristically so converge.

There are several explanations for the lack of convergence, and relativism is a prime one. Other explanations include the explanation that moral disagreements are really other forms of disagreement, which only seem to be moral (e.g. two people disagreeing on abortion because of one's metaphysical, religious beliefs about what God will punish someone for). Another common explanation is that seemingly moral disagreements flow from agents with different experiences or interests. For example, a poor person may want more redistributive tax than a rich one, either because both wish for the result favoring their interests, or because one or both lack a deep understanding of the other's situation, and are therefore ignorant of salient facts. Undoubtedly, some of these ways of dispelling disagreement work to resolve some particular cases of disagreement. But it seems some remain.

My friend and I consider all the facts of a situation, we are sure we each understand every in and out of what's going on. We have similar life experiences and face similar choices. And yet we still have divergent views (i.e. disagree). The disagreement persists after long days of argument, and we know exactly why we disagree: he values communitarian ideals, and I individualistic ones. There is nothing more to say.

It is the kind of disagreement captured in the previous paragraph that moral relativism captures well. The intractable kind where we differ on some basic value and therefore reach an impasse. Relativism also does a good job allowing for this kind of disagreement without making our moral judgements either uniformly false (per error theory) or mere states of our emotions: relativism allows for the part of our moral practice that consists in describing the world according to moral attributes. (Of course, one could also argue for an expressivist kind of relativism, with its own attractive and unattractive features, but I set that aside for this essay.) Most significantly, if moral relativism were true, we would expect to see widespread disagreement on particular issues. If there are many moral frameworks, each with its own true moral judgements, then we would expect to see divergent views—as we really do see. This suggests that moral relativism does do a good job accounting for the disagreements we see, understanding 'disagreement' as we have done so far as 'divergent moral views'.

So, I have argued in the previous paragraph in favour of the prompt. Now, I shall give the central objection to it. While moral relativism accounts for the existence of divergent views on some moral issue, it does not well account for how we engage with those views. In particular, if you and I were to have a serious moral disagreement, we might argue for a long time, realize where the impasse is (say, on some basic value) and keep on arguing. When we morally disagree (read 'disagree' now

in the sense of ‘clash’—when our divergent views meet each other), it does not feel like we are talking past each other, but rather as though we are both grappling, at the same time, with the same thing. If moral relativism were true, we would expect the feeling to be one of talking past each other, as we do when we praise opposing sports teams without any serious hope of convincing the other person. Or, if it were true, we might expect moral arguments—after reaching a certain point at which time the impasse is identified—to become more exercises in non-argumentative persuasion: resorts to poetry or art to evoke imaginative feelings in the interlocutor that might induce a change in moral framework altogether. But this does not seem to be what we see. Instead, the argument continues—not through non-logical entreaties via poetry etc., but through continued pressure from the administration of moral judgements and the like. So, if moral relativism were true, we would expect the character of our disagreements—if not the fact of our disagreeing views—to be different.

There are several ways the relativist could respond. The relativist might say that the non-logical attempts at persuasion are in fact how we do try to persuade once the impasse is actually reached, but that few of us ever argue long enough to reach the impasse. Or, the relativist might say that relativism is not actually adopted by those engaging in moral discourse now—but it ought to be accepted, which would change the character of our moral discourse to something other than what it currently is. Either is a plausible rejoinder, but developing either is outside the scope of this essay, (and, personally, I think likely in part at least unsuccessful). Instead, I accept the thrust of the objection and grant that moral relativism does not well explain the character of our disagreements. But the question does not ask whether it well explains our moral disagreements wholesale, or whether it explains the character of our moral disagreements or moral practice. The question is more limited, and asks only about the ‘existence’ of moral disagreements. Insofar as the ‘existence’ refers to divergent views, as I discussed above, relativism has a good account; insofar as it refers to the existence of our disagreements with one another (and, inherent in that, the character of the disagreements), it does not.

In this essay, I gave a brief definition of moral relativism, and discussed moral disagreements. I argued relativism does a good job accounting for the existence of divergent moral views (i.e. disagreement about some issue), though not the character of our moral disagreements with each other.