

Is Moral Relativism Really a Problem?

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Psychological research suggests it is not.

Suppose you believe abortion is permissible. Would that belief alone make it so? No? Then how about if most Americans believed it? Would *that* suffice? If you think the answer to either question is yes, then chances are you are a moral relativist. You may hold that generally, as Hamlet put it, “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

Moral relativism has as bad a reputation as any view about morality could. For example, in a 2011 interview for the conservative nonprofit American Enterprise Institute, then representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin said, “Moral relativism has done so much damage to the bottom end of this country, the bottom fifth has been damaged by the culture of moral relativism more than by anything else, I would argue. If you ask me what the biggest problem in America is, I’m not going to tell you debt, deficits, statistics, economics—I’ll tell you it’s moral relativism.”

Many other (mostly conservative and religious) commentators have lamented moral relativism’s pernicious influence as well. But is this diagnosis warranted? Should Americans really be concerned about relativist interpretations of morality? This is the question I am interested in. To answer it, I suggest we turn to psychology and philosophy.

Moral Relativism Is Popular

For moral relativism to be a potential problem, there must be people who believe in it. Many people. In recent years, an increasing number of psychologists have wondered just how relativist Americans really are. At first, their studies seemed to suggest that moral matters are dominantly regarded as objective—that is, as *not* relative to either the individual or the culture. Looking more carefully at these studies, however, some of my philosophical

colleagues and I came to believe that the researchers may not have fully succeeded in measuring what they thought they were.

In light of this problem, I recently decided to team up with Jennifer Wright, a psychologist at the College of Charleston. Together we developed a novel experimental design for measuring views about the foundations of morality. In an online survey, we employed this design with more than 100 U.S. students and so-called crowd workers employed via the Web site Amazon Mechanical Turk.

For example, we asked them how they would interpret situations in which two people disagree about a moral statement (such as that abortion is impermissible). Did they think that one of those people was right and the other was wrong, that both were right, that both were wrong, or that neither was right or wrong?

When we first looked at our study's results, Wright and I were stunned. In contrast to much previous research, the majority of participants seemed to deny moral objectivity. They rather dominantly tended toward individualist and culture-based forms of relativism (around 64 percent of all responses), as well as toward other forms of nonobjectivism.

In the disagreement task described above, for example, around half of the subjects answered that the people who affirmed and who denied the permissibility of abortion were both right. If the disagreeing parties were presented as members of different cultures, this answer attracted more than two thirds of responses.

Together with initial subsequent studies, this research hence provides initial evidence for moral relativism being quite widespread. Today many Americans seem to regard the truth of moral judgments as relative to their own beliefs and/or the dominant beliefs of their culture. But this finding does not necessarily mean we should be concerned. Are widespread relativist attitudes indeed a *problem*, as Ryan and other commentators have suggested? Our findings so far do not yet indicate there is cause for concern.

Moral Relativism Is Not Much of a Problem

Warnings against moral relativism are most often based on theoretical speculation. Critics consider the view's nature and add certain assumptions about human psychology. Then they infer how being a relativist might affect a person's behavior. For example, for a relativist, even actions such as murder or rape can never be *really* or *absolutely* wrong; they are only wrong to the extent that the relativist or most members of his or her culture believe them to be so.

One may therefore worry that relativists are less motivated to refrain from murdering and raping than people who regard these actions as objectively wrong. While this scenario may sound plausible, however, it is important to note that relativism's effects can only ultimately be determined by relevant studies.

So far, scientific investigations do not support the suspicion that moral relativism is problematic. True, there are two studies that do suggest such a conclusion. In one of them, participants were led to think about morality in either relativist or objectivist terms. It turned out that subjects in the relativist condition were more likely to cheat in a lottery and to state that they would be willing to steal than those in the objectivist condition. In the other study, participants who had been exposed to relativist ideas were less likely to donate to charity than those who had been exposed to objectivist ones.

That said, there is also evidence that associates moral relativism with positive behaviors. In one of her earlier studies, Wright and her colleagues informed their participants that another person disagreed with one of their moral judgments. Then the researchers measured the subjects' degree of tolerance for this person's divergent moral view. For example, participants were asked how willing they would be to interact with the person, how willing they would be to help him or her and how comfortable they generally were with another individual denying one of their moral judgments. It turned out that subjects with relativist leanings were more tolerant toward the disagreeing person than those who had tended toward objectivism.

This research suggests that relativist attitudes may manifest themselves in more varied ways than is often thought. Some of these effects are negative; others are positive. Finally, I suspect that in most everyday contexts, relativism's effects will be simply negligible. Numerous kinds of nonmoral reasons and influences motivate prosocial, and counteract antisocial, behaviors, too.

Thus, even if it were true that relativists lacked strong *moral* motivation to refrain from murder or rape, this situation would hardly lead them to go out and actually murder and rape. Like most other people, relativists will have a natural inhibition against doing such things; they will feel sympathy toward fellow human beings, they will want to avoid being put in jail or being socially ostracized, and so on.

So is moral relativism the "biggest problem in America"? Or even a big problem? I suggest that Ryan and other commentators look instead at issues such as climate change, increasing economic inequality or insufficient health care. If we consider the available

scientific evidence, moral relativism may be more widespread than thought. Yet it likely does not pose any serious threat to American society.