

The Maze of Moral Relativism

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Relativism about morality has come to play an increasingly important role in contemporary culture. To many thoughtful people, and especially to those who are unwilling to derive their morality from a religion, it appears unavoidable. Where would absolute facts about right and wrong come from, they reason, if there is no supreme being to decree them? We should reject moral absolutes, even as we keep our moral convictions, allowing that there can be right and wrong relative to this or that moral code, but no right and wrong per se. (See, for example, Stanley Fish's 2001 op-ed, "Condemnation Without Absolutes.")^[1]

When we decided that there were no such things as witches, we didn't become relativists about witches.

Is it plausible to respond to the rejection of absolute moral facts with a relativistic view of morality? Why should our response not be a more extreme, nihilistic one, according to which we stop using normative terms like "right" and "wrong" altogether, be it in their absolutist or relativist guises?

Relativism is not always a coherent way of responding to the rejection of a certain class of facts. When we decided that there were no such things as witches, we didn't become relativists about witches. Rather, we just gave up witch talk altogether, except by way of characterizing the attitudes of people (such as those in Salem) who mistakenly believed that the world contained witches, or by way of characterizing what it is that children find it fun to pretend to be on Halloween. We became what we may call "eliminativists" about witches.

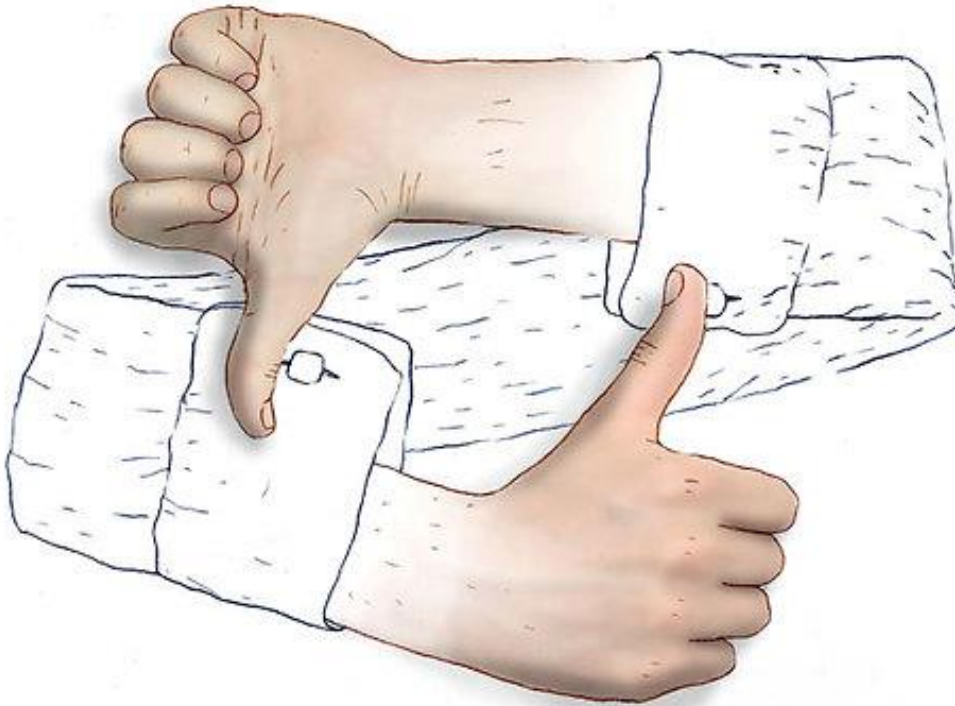
On the other hand, when Einstein taught us, in his Special Theory of Relativity, that there was no such thing as the absolute simultaneity of two events, the recommended outcome was that we become relativists about simultaneity, allowing that there is such a thing as "simultaneity relative to a (spatio-temporal) frame of reference," but not simultaneity as such.

What's the difference between the witch case and the simultaneity case? Why did the latter rejection lead to relativism, but the former to eliminativism?

In the simultaneity case, Einstein showed that while the world does not contain simultaneity as such, it does contain its relativistic cousin — simultaneity relative to a frame of reference — a property that plays something like the same sort of role as classical simultaneity did in our theory of the world.

By contrast, in the witch case, once we give up on witches, there is no relativistic cousin that plays anything like the role that witches were supposed to play. The property, that two events may have, of "being simultaneous relative to frame of reference F" is recognizably a kind of simultaneity. But the property of "being a witch according to a belief system T" is not a kind of

witch, but a kind of content (the content of belief system T): it's a way of characterizing what belief system T says, not a way of characterizing the world.



Now, the question is whether the moral case is more like that of simultaneity or more like that of witches? When we reject absolute moral facts is moral relativism the correct outcome or is it moral eliminativism (nihilism)?

The answer, as we have seen, depends on whether there are relativistic cousins of “right” and “wrong” that can play something like the same role that absolute “right” and “wrong” play.

It is hard to see what those could be.

What’s essential to “right” and “wrong” is that they are normative terms, terms that are used to say how things ought to be, in contrast with how things actually are. But what relativistic cousin of “right” and “wrong” could play anything like such a normative role?

Most moral relativists say that moral right and wrong are to be relativized to a community’s “moral code.” According to some such codes, eating beef is permissible; according to others, it is an abomination and must never be allowed. The relativist proposal is that we must never talk simply about what’s right or wrong, but only about what’s “right or wrong relative to a particular moral code.”

The trouble is that while “Eating beef is wrong” is clearly a normative statement, “Eating beef is wrong relative to the moral code of the Hindus” is just a descriptive remark that carries no normative import whatsoever. It’s just a way of characterizing what is claimed by a particular moral code, that of the Hindus. We can see this from the fact that anyone, regardless of their

views about eating beef, can agree that eating beef is wrong relative to the moral code of the Hindus.

So, it looks as though the moral case is more like the witch case than the simultaneity case: there are no relativistic cousins of “right” and “wrong.” Denial of moral absolutism leads not to relativism, but to nihilism.[2]

If there are no absolute facts about morality, “right” and “wrong” would have to join “witch” in the dustbin of failed concepts.

There is no half-way house called “moral relativism,” in which we continue to use normative vocabulary with the stipulation that it is to be understood as relativized to particular moral codes. If there are no absolute facts about morality, “right” and “wrong” would have to join “witch” in the dustbin of failed concepts.

The argument is significant because it shows that we should not rush to give up on absolute moral facts, mysterious as they can sometimes seem, for the world might seem even more mysterious without any normative vocabulary whatsoever.

One might be suspicious of my argument against moral relativism. Aren't we familiar with some normative domains — such as that of etiquette — about which we are all relativists? Surely, no one in their right minds would think that there is some absolute fact of the matter about whether we ought to slurp our noodles while eating.

If we are dining at Buckingham Palace, we ought not to slurp, since our hosts would consider it offensive, and we ought not, other things being equal, offend our hosts. On the other hand, if we are dining in Xian, China, we ought to slurp, since in Xian slurping is considered to be a sign that we are enjoying our meal, and our hosts would consider it offensive if we didn't slurp, and we ought not, other things being equal, offend our hosts.

But if relativism is coherent in the case of etiquette why couldn't we claim that morality is relative in the same way?

The reason is that our relativism about etiquette does not actually dispense with all absolute moral facts. Rather, we are relativists about etiquette in the sense that, with respect to a restricted range of issues (such as table manners and greetings), we take the correct absolute norm to be “we ought not, other things being equal, offend our hosts.”

This norm is absolute and applies to everyone and at all times. Its relativistic flavor comes from the fact that, with respect to that limited range of behaviors (table manners and greetings, but not, say, the abuse of children for fun), it advocates varying one's behavior with local convention.

In other words, the relativism of etiquette depends on the existence of absolute moral norms. Since etiquette does not dispense with absolute moral facts, one cannot hope to use it as a model for moral relativism.

Suppose we take this point on board, though, and admit that there have to be some absolute moral facts. Why couldn't they all be like the facts involved in etiquette? Why couldn't they all say that, with respect to any morally relevant question, what we ought to do depends on what the local conventions are?

The trouble with this approach is that once we have admitted that there are some absolute moral facts, it is hard to see why we shouldn't think that there are many — as many as common sense and ordinary reasoning appear to warrant. Having given up on the purity of a thoroughgoing anti-absolutism, we would now be in the business of trying to figure out what absolute moral facts there are. To do that, we would need to employ our usual mix of argument, intuition and experience. And what argument, intuition and experience tell us is that whether we should slurp our noodles depends on what the local conventions are, but whether we should abuse children for fun does not.

A would-be relativist about morality needs to decide whether his view grants the existence of some absolute moral facts, or whether it is to be a pure relativism, free of any commitment to absolutes. The latter position, I have argued, is mere nihilism; whereas the former leads us straight out of relativism and back into the quest for the moral absolutes.

None of this is to deny that there are hard cases, where it is not easy to see what the correct answer to a moral question is. It is merely to emphasize that there appears to be no good alternative to thinking that, when we are in a muddle about what the answer to a hard moral question is, we are in a muddle about what the absolutely correct answer is.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Pinning a precise philosophical position on someone, especially a non-philosopher, is always tricky, because people tend to give non-equivalent formulations of what they take to be the same view. Fish, for example, after saying that his view is that “there can be no independent standards for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one,” which sounds appropriately relativistic, ends up claiming that all he means to defend is “the practice of putting yourself in your adversary's shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else might want to wear them.” The latter, though, is just the recommendation of empathetic understanding and is, of course, both good counsel and perfectly consistent with the endorsement of moral absolutes.

Another view with which moral relativism is sometimes conflated is the view that the right thing to do can depend on the circumstances. There is no question that the right thing to do can depend on the circumstances, even on an absolutist view. Whether you should help someone in need can depend on what your circumstances are, what their circumstances are, and so forth. What makes a view relativistic is its holding that the right thing to do depends not just on the circumstances, but on what the person (or his community) takes to be the right thing to do, on their moral code.

In this column, I am only concerned with those who wish to deny that there are any absolute moral truths in this sense. If that is not your view, then you are not the target of this particular discussion.

[2] Some philosophers may think that they can evade this problem by casting the relativism in terms of a relativized truth predicate rather than a relativized moral predicate. But as I have explained elsewhere, the problem of the loss of normative content recurs in that setting.