

PHI 202 | Study questions 8: Moral relativism

Michal Masny | 13 November 2019

Readings:

Gensler, H. (1998). Cultural Relativism. In *Ethics: A contemporary introduction*.

Harman, G. (ms). Moral relativism explained.

- (1) Reminder: What is the difference between a *valid* argument and a *sound* argument?
- (2) Explain each of the following theses and the relations between them:
 - (i) descriptive moral relativism, (ii) descriptive cultural relativism, (iii) descriptive subjectivism, (iv) normative moral relativism, (v) normative cultural relativism, (vi) normative subjectivism
- (3) Descriptive cultural relativism can be formulated as a thesis about *specific* moral judgments or as a thesis about *general* moral principles. Is either version true?
- (4) *Group exercise*: Should we accept normative cultural relativism (CR)? What are the arguments in favour and against this thesis? How could one respond to them? Do these responses succeed?

Guidelines: At the beginning of your contribution clarify whether are offering (i) an argument for CR, (ii) an argument against CR, (iii) a consideration in support of some earlier argument, (iv) an objection to some earlier argument, (v) none of the above. Don't restrict yourselves to the material covered in the lectures and the readings.

(5) According to a general statement of normative cultural relativism, "X is right" means "X is approved by the society in question". To give substance to this thesis we need to say more about the relevant standard for "approved by the society".

(i) What is the relevant society: cultural, religious, political, ethical, racial, gender-based? Is any of these privileged or are they all relevant? And what if one belongs to multiple societies whose values conflict with each other?

(ii) Does X have to be approved *universally* or only by *the majority*? The former option leaves very few things right or wrong. The latter option faces various voting paradoxes such as the Condorcet Paradox.

(iii) Is the relevant standard what *the society actually approves* or what *the informed society would approve*? For instance, suppose that some society actually both approves and disapproves of X. Does it follow that X is both right and wrong relative to that framework? Or suppose that the society disapproves of X only because they have some false empirical belief. Is X right or wrong relative to that framework?

(6) "If CR is true, then we cannot coherently criticise the norms of our society, we cannot coherently criticise the norms of other societies, and we cannot make sense of the idea of moral progress". Is this correct?