

A Defense of Ethical Relativism

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Relativism is usually a derogatory word in philosophical bioethics in the West. If people make the mistake of trying to understand radically “different” points of view, an accusation of relativism is quickly forthcoming.¹ But why should this be an accusation? My aim in this paper is to demonstrate that it should not.

My demonstration is simple, and it consists of filling in the empty boxes of Table 1. Once I have done this, it should be clear to anybody that “relativism” is a profoundly misused concept, and that if it is understood correctly, there is no shame in being a relativist in one’s bioethical work.

Sources and Attitudes

Let me start by explaining what I mean by the “isms” featured in Table 1.

The ethical norms and values that in fact guide our actions and moral thinking come from three closely related sources, and we can have roughly three attitudes concerning their validity, or prescriptive (normatively action-guiding) power.

The *sources* from which *my* norms and values are derived are

- myself,
- other people, and
- objective reality (whatever that means).

The same observation can, of course, be extended to other people, where *their* norms and values are derived from themselves, others, and objective, or extra-human, sources.

Note that I am *not* offering these observations as topics for critical discussion; this is simply how things are. Everyone has their (or at least I have my) own

Table 1. A periodic table of “isms”

~~~	Absolutism	Relativism	Nihilism
Objectivism			
Intersubjectivism			
Subjectivism			

life, thoughts, and characteristics, and these do guide, to some extent, human actions, whether they *should* do so or not. We also live with other people, and their habits and ideas have a guiding effect on our values, norms, and actions. (We call people of whom this is not true “psychopaths”—another derogatory word that I will not go into here.) And as for objective factors, we at least live in a physical world that we cannot fully control, and we must somehow accommodate its demands in our behavior, if not always in our attitudes, simply to survive.

The prescriptive power, or bindingness, or validity of these norms and values is a different matter, and we can, as I said, take three different attitudes toward any one of them. One possibility is to say that at least some of them are *absolutely* binding, and that it would be morally wrong not to abide by them. Another option is to say that all or some of them are *relatively* binding; that for certain specified people in certain specified contexts it would be wrong not to live by them. And yet another choice is to say that the validity or normative bindingness of some or all of these values and norms is *nil*; implying that we should either avoid complying with them or that it does not matter whether we do or not.

By crossing these two lists we end up with my original table, where the springs of norms and values provide the vertical dimension and the views regarding their validity the horizontal dimension. Let me describe the contents of the table one column at a time.

### **Absolutism**

First, *absolutism* is the creed that states that some norms and values should be observed absolutely, or without exception. Because this view has been the traditional starting point of Western moral philosophy since Greek antiquity, many explanations and justifications have been presented for this requirement during the last 2400 years or so.

Starting from the “objective” version of this doctrine, Plato argued that there is, apart from this changing and observable world, an eternal world of ideas, which is, in fact, more real than the one we can see, hear, smell, and touch here. Moral norms and values reside in the world of ideas, and it is our task to seek knowledge concerning them and to observe them the best we can, rejecting, if necessary, the customs of our society, and our own transitory desires.² Thomas Aquinas echoed the Platonic notion in his natural law theory, in which God and Reason provide us with the right moral guidance,³ and Immanuel Kant followed a similar path by arguing that human rationality, or universal reason, is the only legitimate source of moral norms.⁴ The utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham is also a form of absolute objectivism in that it finds the objective basis of morality in pleasure and pain—and requires us always to aim at the greatest happiness of the greatest number in our actions.⁵

Whether or not “absolute intersubjectivism” as a normative doctrine exists is a question in itself. In theory, it would mean that contractually assumed or traditionally shared social or communal values should rule absolutely. But the question is, why should people who have not actually made the contract, or people who are not members of the specified society or community, observe the designated norms and values?⁶ John Rawls in his theory of justice fell back on the “objective,” Kantian idea that all reasonable people ought to make the contract he outlined.⁷ And Alasdair MacIntyre, Rawls’s “communitarian” critic,

also eventually found his way back to the natural law theory of Thomas Aquinas.⁸ So perhaps this box should remain empty.

The “subjective” version says that *my* norms and values ought to rule absolutely over all other values, including those derived from universal reason, God, and community ideals. This is certainly a possible program, but it is not clear that it has ever been philosophically defended. The character of Callicles in one of Plato’s dialogues defends a view that comes close to this doctrine. He argues, in the dialogue, that strong individuals are entitled to do whatever they like, regardless of legal or social norms by which the weak try to slow them down.⁹ But despite his popularity as a scarecrow in the history of Western moral philosophy, Callicles is a fictional character invented by the father of absolute objectivism, so we should approach him with some caution.

## **Relativism**

Second, *relativism* is the doctrine that says that the validity of norms and values is always related to some changing, or diverse, phenomenon or viewpoint. It does not say that all norms and values should be rejected, although it is opposed to the idea of absolute rules and principles.

The relativization of manners, customs, and laws in Western moral philosophy started in the 18th century with challenges against an immutable notion of reason as the basis of (objective) historical progress. Adam Smith argued, following many of his contemporaries, that human history is basically economic history, and that changes in the production and distribution of goods and services, rather than changes in the way people think about them, are the prime mover of legislation and political developments.¹⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in his turn, said that although both ideas and material circumstances mold historical progress, the development of new forms of government and legal regulation has a certain schedule, or dialectic, in which fundamental moral concepts change, and forms of reason follow one another.¹¹ And Karl Marx assumed elements from both Smith and Hegel when he put together his theory of the laws of history, and rejected most Western moralities as bourgeois deception.¹²

During the 20th century, relativism was extended more directly to (intersubjective) societies. At the turn and in the first half of the century, social anthropologists shocked Westerners by giving vivid descriptions of the alien manners of some other cultures.¹³ After the second world war, nation states started, in the form of the United Nations and in other ways, seriously to forge contracts to regulate international affairs, including international moral codes.¹⁴ And this is where we still are, trying to find ways to understand each other’s cultures, religions, and moralities, and trying to ensure that people can change their circumstances if they feel that they cannot live with certain features of their inborn culture.

The subjective variation of relativism reminds us that every individual (and, metaphorically speaking, every culture and nation) has her or his or its own viewpoint.¹⁵ “Rational egoism” teaches that we are allowed, and even required, to cherish our own viewpoints, but at the same time understand that other people have others, and that these are equally valuable to them.¹⁶ This “prudent” and “tolerant” form of egoism should not be confused with the Callicles-type absolute egoism, in which one person is set at the center of our shared universe.

**Nihilism**

Third, *nihilism* does say that some, or all, norms and values are invalid, and to be rejected. The motivation for this rejection in different forms of nihilism varies from intellectual irritation to moral concern. There are also two main “deontic” strands of the creed; one stating that we are *allowed* to disregard certain values, and the other insisting that we *must* do so.¹⁷

When nihilistic ideas are applied to objectivist moral theories, there are two possible conclusions. If we say that people are permitted to ignore, for instance, the main Kantian or Benthamite rules (which are predominantly altruistic), then we automatically advocate some sort of *egoism*.¹⁸ If, on the other hand, we wage a moral or intellectual war against the universality of these (or contractual or communal) values, then we are more likely to end up in the camps of *existentialism* or *emotivism*.¹⁹

The requirement to reject subjective and intersubjective norms and values is usually a part of traditional forms of absolute objectivism. This means that as regards human (individual- or community-based) values, then, Plato, Aquinas, Kant, and Bentham can all be seen as nihilists. Perhaps this is an excessively weird way to use the concept, but the fact is that they do deny the validity of some values. From the viewpoint of *existentialism*, this also means that the named dignitaries encouraged people to live “inauthentically,” or in “bad faith.”²⁰

**What is Relativism?**

I have now filled in the blanks of Table 1. Table 2 shows the completed form.

Let me now recap my findings against the information contained in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The periodic table of ethical “isms”

~~~	Absolutism	Relativism	Nihilism
Objectivism	Objective values should rule absolutely; Plato, Aquinas, Kant, Bentham	Objective values are relative to historical laws; Smith, Hegel, Marx	People may or must reject objective values; egoism, existentialism, emotivism
Intersubjectivism	“Contractual or shared norms and values should rule absolutely”; collapses into objectivism?	Contractual or shared values should rule the participants or members of groups	People may or must reject contractual or shared values; egoism, absolute objectivism?
Subjectivism	My values should rule absolutely over all other values; “Callicles-type egoism”	Everybody’s values should rule them; rational egoism	People may or must reject their own values; egoism, absolute objectivism

A Defense of Ethical Relativism

First, what, in the light of my observations, is relativism? Very briefly, it seems to be the doctrine that (from the bottom up in the center column of Table 2)

- places value on individuals—all individuals, not just one;
- seeks for, finds, and defines valid norms in terms of contracts and shared values—that is, in terms of human interaction and its outcomes; and
- recognizes cultural, historical, and other differences between norms and values—but does not undermine the validity of any one of them.

Secondly, what is relativism not? Well, it is not mindless political or communal loyalty, and it is not absolute egoism—these notions seem to be invented by the competing schools of thought. Nor is it nihilistic—it does not deny the validity of all norms and values. (It does reject some, but so do all moral theories.)

And finally, what would the alternative to relativism be? If the alternative is absolute objectivism, then what is required is a giant jump, or a leap of faith, into one particular view of human nature and morality. And because this view can, for me, only be mine, the alternative to relativism is ... well, absolute egoism. This is not too encouraging, and hence I think that relativism is, after all, not such a bad idea.

Notes

1. This can be seen especially well in Macklin R. *Against Relativism—Cultural Diversity and the Search for Ethical Universals in Medicine*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1999. But the phenomenon is common, and can be seen in such diverse contributions as Beauchamp TL, Childress JF. *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 5th ed. New York: Oxford University Press; 2000; Singer P. *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1979; Gillon R. *Philosophical Medical Ethics*. Chichester: Wiley; 1985; Harris J. *The Value of Life: An Introduction to Medical Ethics*. London: Routledge; 1985; Pellegrino ED, Thomasma DC. *For the Patient's Good: The Restoration of Beneficence in Health Care*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1988; Maclean A. *The Elimination of Morality: Reflections on Utilitarianism and Bioethics*. London: Routledge; 1993; Rachels J. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill; 1993; Häyry M. Moral relativism and the philosophical criticism of other cultures. *Science Studies* 1992;5:53–56; and Häyry M. *Liberal Utilitarianism and Applied Ethics*. London and New York: Routledge; 1994.
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4. Kant I. *Grundlegung zur Metaphysic der Sitten* (1785) and *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Tugendlehre* (1797). In Kant I. *Ethical Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Ellington JW, transl. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company; 1994; Scheewind JB. *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1998.
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8. MacIntyre A. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth; 1981; MacIntyre A. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth; 1988; MacIntyre A. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press; 1990.

9. Plato. *Gorgias*. Waterfield R, transl. Oxford: Oxford University Press; [c. 380 BCE] 1998.
10. Smith A. *The Wealth of Nations*. Skinner A, ed. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books; [1776] 1982.
11. Hegel GWF. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Haldane ES, Simson FH, transl. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; [1833-1836] 1995.
12. Marx K. *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. MacLellan D, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2000.
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14. United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948. Cf. Häyry M. Another look at dignity. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 2004;14:7-14.
15. Westermarck E. *Ethical Relativity*. London: Kegan Paul; 1932. Cf. Herder JG. *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag; [1784] 1989.
16. Nozick R. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974; Narveson J. *The Libertarian Idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; 1988; Gauthier D. *Morals by Agreement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1986.
17. I use the term "deontic" here in the sense defined by von Wright GH. Deontic logic. *Mind* 1951;60:1-15.
18. Rand A. *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*. New York: New American Library; 1961; Wilson EO. *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press; 1975.
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