

# Relativism

## RELATIVISM

Allen Wood

Cornell University

Copyright 1995 Allen Wood

*Professor Wood would like to be asked permission for any use people would like to make of the article, so that if it appears in print somewhere he knows about it and has had the option of saying yes or no. Or if someone wants to make some new and creative use of it, He'd like to have an option of refusing that too. But he is generally disposed to let people do with it what they want.*

In philosophy courses I often encounter people who say things like this: "What anyone believes is true for that person. What you believe is true for you, what I believe is true for me." The view expressed in such statements is usually called "relativism". This view denies that there is any such thing as absolute truth and claims that all truth is relative to the person who believes it.

### 1. Protagorean relativism

Though relativism is apparently attractive to some beginners in philosophy, there are virtually no relativists among significant figures in the history of philosophy. The principal exception to this last claim is Protagoras of Abdera (c. 485-410 B.G.), a Greek philosopher who apparently put forward a version of relativism in a treatise entitled *Truth*. None of Protagoras' writings have come down to us, but his views are reported by others, chiefly by Plato in the dialogues *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus*.

According to Protagoras, "The human being is the measure of all things, of those that are, that they are, and of those that are not, that they are not." (1) By this Protagoras apparently meant that each individual person is the measure of how things are to that person: things are or are not (to me) according as they appear to me to be or not be. Protagoras was thinking of cases like this: To me the wind feels cold, while to you the wind feels warm. About this case Protagoras wants to say the following: The wind isn't (absolutely or in itself) either cold or warm; "cold" and "warm" are merely subjective states or feelings. To me the wind feels (or is) cold, and to you it feels (or is) warm, and beyond This there is no fact of the matter concerning the temperature of the wind. (2)

Protagoras was apparently disputing the views of Parmenides of Elea. Parmenides' view was: What is, is; what is not, is not; and since the mere seeming of sense perception falls short of full being, it can have no reality at all. Against this, Protagoras understandably wanted to defend the reality of sense perception. But according to Plato's account, Protagoras wanted to extend his defense of appearance beyond perceptual feelings to other kinds of seemings, such as beliefs. If I believe that the world is a certain way, then that's how the world seems to me, and so that's how the world *is* (to me). If you have a different belief, then that's how the world appears, and therefore how it *is*, to you. From this Protagoras concluded that error and false belief are absolutely impossible. (3) For a belief says only how things seem to someone, and how they seem to anyone is always how they *are* (to that person). This view, in fact, is not so far from Parmenides' own, since by inflating the "appearance" side of the appearance/reality distinction to the point where it completely excludes the "reality" side, he too is denying there is room for a difference between appearance and reality.

Let's try to imagine a world of which Protagoras' view would give us a correct account. Suppose a world composed entirely of independent sets of private sensations or experiences (such as my feeling of cold, which is present only to me and not to you, and your feeling of warmth, which is present to you and not to me). I have access only to my private experiences, you have access only to yours, and neither of us has access to anything we might share in common -- to a public or "objective" world, containing things like material objects. To get Protagoras' view, however, we must suppose not only that my experiences are there only for me, but also that I can't be mistaken about any of them. And in order to exclude the possibility of any sort of error, we have to suppose, finally, that in this world people can formulate judgments only about things with which they are acquainted, so that I couldn't make any erroneous judgments about someone else's experiences. But in the world we're imagining now, there isn't anything about which two people could either agree or disagree. Each of us is shut up in our own private microcosm; my seemings don't even exist in your little world, and yours don't exist in mine. There couldn't be any error or falsehood, because the only things a person can make judgments about are exactly as that person thinks they are. In that sense each person's beliefs in that world are necessarily and infallibly true, but they are true only *for* that person, because no one else could possibly have access to that truth.

But for this very reason, it could be argued that in such a world there would be *no place at all* for the idea of "truth". Truth applies only to judgments about a shared world, which can be either as someone believes it is or otherwise than it is believed to be. For the possibility of saying or believing something true goes hand in hand with the possibility of saying or believing something false; in a world where there is no possibility of ever calling a belief or assertion "false", there would also be no use for the word "true". In such a world, however, there would also be no use for the word "belief". For beliefs aim at truth, and to believe that *p* is exactly the same thing as believing that *p* is *true*. If I can't apply "true" to my thoughts or speech acts, then none of my thoughts could count as a belief. And since to assert that *p* is no different from asserting that *p* is true, nothing anyone says in that world could count as an assertion.

We don't think we live in a world of that kind. We take ourselves to have beliefs and make assertions, and we think our world contains public objects for beliefs and assertions to be about. We even think of our "private" sensations as public objects in the sense that other people can have beliefs about them that can be true or false. If you say that the wind feels warm to you, I might believe you lying to me, or even that you are lying to *yourself*. This could not happen in a Protagorean world. In fact, even our ability to imagine a Protagorean world shows that *for us* this world is not Protagorean at all. Although we have been thinking of that world as one in which people's private experiences would not be public objects *in that world*, we have nevertheless been taking it for granted that the judgments we have been making about their experiences are shared and public between *us*.

### 2. Is relativism self-refuting?

What this suggests is that Protagoras' view isn't true in our world. But perhaps relativism couldn't be true in *any* world. That is what Plato thought. He argued that Protagoras' relativism is *necessarily* false, because it *refutes itself*. (4)

The problem arises as soon as Protagoras tries either to *assert* relativism or *believe* it. If Protagoras asserts relativism, then he asserts that relativism is *true*, and that those (such as Plato) who deny relativism say and believe something false. But relativism denies that anyone can say or believe anything false. Hence to be consistent Protagoras must concede that the denier of relativism says and believes something true. Consequently, relativism is committed to saying that its own denial is true, and in this way it refutes itself.

Protagoras might try to escape the problem by saying that relativism is true *for* the relativist, while the denial of relativism is true *for* the non-relativist. He might even try to say that when he asserts a proposition, he isn't asserting that the proposition is (absolutely) true (since the notion of absolute truth is what a relativist wants to get rid of) but only that it is *true for him*. But the problem with this is that it is simply not clear what "true for" means here. We do say things like this: "For me it is true that Reagan's social policies were racist, but for you it is true that they weren't." What this means is: *In my opinion*, it is (absolutely, objectively) true that Reagan's policies were racist; *in your opinion* it is (absolutely, objectively) true that they weren't. Or again, we say things like this: "For me it is true that the eighties were financially disastrous, while for you it is true that they were financially good." This might refer to our respective opinions about the eighties, but it might also mean that it is (absolutely, objectively) true that *my* finances did badly in the eighties while *yours* did well. But none of these uses of "true for" succeed in getting rid of the notion of (absolute, objective) truth; on the contrary, when we spell out what they mean, we see that this notion is indispensable to what they mean. Relativists must think they are using "true for" in some different sense, that doesn't depend on the notion of (absolute) truth. But what do relativists intend to say about a proposition when they say that it is "true for" them?

When asked this question, they usually say that **p** is "true for me" if I *believe* that **p**. But this answer is no help, because believing that **p** is no different from believing that **p** is (absolutely) *true*. If relativists say that this isn't what *they* mean when they assert a proposition or believe it, then they are apparently using the terms "assert" and "believe" in a new and mysterious sense. Since they have yet to explain the meanings these words have for them, we can't be sure what (if anything) they are really saying when their mouths make noises that sound to us like *assertions* of relativism. Understanding their words in the usual sense, if you try to assert or believe that there is no (absolute) truth, it has to follow that you can't believe anything at all (not even relativism), and so nothing can be true even *for you* (not even relativism). Relativism is self-refuting simply because it has no way of using or making sense of the expression "true for me" without relying implicitly on the notion "(absolutely) true," the very notion relativism wants to reject.

If their assertions of relativism are to make sense, therefore, relativists must allow at least one proposition to be absolutely true, namely relativism itself. Suppose we let the relativist make relativism itself an exception (the sole exception) to its own claim that all truth is relative. The relativist now says that relativism is true absolutely, and all beliefs *except* relativism and its denial are true only relatively (true for those who believe them). This retreat seems to save relativism from direct self-refutation, but it looks extremely ad hoc. Before it looked as if the relativist's idea was that there is something wrong with the *very idea* of absolute truth; but now the relativist can no longer say that. And once we're allowed to use the notion of absolute truth in asserting relativism, then it's natural to wonder why there couldn't be any other absolute truths except relativism. And of course if there are any others, then relativism itself is absolutely false, since it denies that there is any absolute truth (except itself).

Even with this retreat, moreover, relativism becomes just as self-refuting as it was before as soon as the relativist tries to apply the notion of relative truth to what anyone believes. In order to assert that anything is true *for* someone, the relativist has to say that something else besides relativism is true absolutely. For instance, if the relativist holds that "**p** is true for Socrates" means "Socrates believes that **p**", then in order to assert that **p** is true for Socrates, the relativist has to assert that it is *true* (absolutely) that Socrates believes that **p**. But then "Socrates believes that **p**" is an absolute truth other than relativism, which entails that relativism is absolutely false.

### 3. Ideas which should not be confused with relativism

People who think they are relativists are often trying to express one (or more) ideas different from relativism and not threatened with self-refutation. Here are four such ideas:

#### I. *Skepticism*: All beliefs are uncertain; no belief is justified.

Relativism looks something like skepticism in that they both put all beliefs in the same boat. Further, people are often attracted to relativism by the feeling that others are too confident in the absolute truth of what they believe, and skepticism is the view that no one is ever entitled to such confidence. But skepticism is not the same as relativism, and is even in a way its diametrical opposite. For relativism says that whatever anybody believes must be true (for that person), so that no belief can ever be mistaken, unjustified or even uncertain. Skepticism does not deny that some beliefs are (absolutely) true, it denies only that we can ever be sure which beliefs these are. Skepticism is quite an extreme position, and probably false; but it is not threatened with self-refutation, as relativism is. For it is perfectly self-consistent to say that you hold beliefs that are uncertain and unjustified. (Religious people sometimes say such things about beliefs they hold on faith.) A skeptic must hold that skepticism itself is uncertain, but there is no self-refutation involved in doing that.

If a relativist catches you audaciously suggesting that there is such a thing as (absolute) truth, then you are bound to be asked the rhetorical question: "But who is to decide what the truth is?" Apparently the relativist thinks if you hold that there is an absolute, objective truth, then you have to believe there is some authority whose word on that truth must not be questioned. Perhaps the rhetorical question is meant to challenge your right to set yourself up as such an authority; it is supposed to make you either abandon the whole idea of absolute truth or else reveal yourself for the arrogant dogmatist you really are. But the possibility of skepticism shows very graphically that this is an utterly false dilemma. Skeptics don't deny that there is an absolute truth, but they are as far from dogmatism as it is possible to be, since they deny absolutely that anyone (least of all themselves) could ever be in a position to say with certainty what the truth is.

Even though skepticism is the exact opposite of relativism, I sometimes suspect that people have arrived at relativism by going through skepticism. First they became aware that there is widespread disagreement on fundamental philosophical issues, which fostered in them a commendable (though perhaps exaggerated) sense of intellectual modesty. This led them (perhaps rashly) to the extreme skeptical conclusion that nobody knows anything at all about anything and that all opinions are equally doubtful. But that conclusion panicked them, so they began looking around for a way in which people can be certain about something even in the face of this universal uncertainty. As a quick way out, they hit on this compromise: If everyone just stops trying to claim *absolute* truth for what they believe, then in return we can let each person's beliefs count as "true for them". But this attempt at a negotiated settlement is bound to fail, because it is nothing but an attempt to combine two directly contradictory ideas (namely: "All beliefs are utterly doubtful" and "All beliefs are unquestionably certain").

#### II. Different people can be justified in holding different beliefs.

In the eighteenth century, chemists such as Georg Ernst Stahl and Joseph Priestley held that when something burns, it loses a substance called "phlogiston". Later, after the researches of Antoine Lavoisier, chemists came to reject the phlogiston theory in favor of the theory that combustion involved not the loss of something, but the gain of something, namely, oxygen.(5) Before Lavoisier, the most informed chemists in the world all believed the phlogiston theory; very likely they were *justified* in doing so: perhaps evidence for the phlogiston theory was so strong that they would have been unreasonable if they had not believed it. But Lavoisier acquired new evidence, which justifies rejecting the phlogiston theory and believing the oxidation theory instead.

There is nothing relativistic in claiming that Stahl and Priestley were justified in believing the phlogiston theory while Lavoisier was justified in rejecting it. That is not at all the same as claiming that the phlogiston theory was "true for Stahl, but not true for Lavoisier." It is one thing for a person to be justified in holding a belief, and a very different thing for the belief to be true. If you and I hold mutually incompatible beliefs, then what at least one of us believes must be false; but it could still be true that my belief is justified on the evidence which I have and your belief is justified on the evidence you have. In a case like this the obvious thing to do is to communicate with one another as we inquire, sharing evidence until (hopefully) we eventually come to agreement on (what we hope is) the truth. But we shouldn't deceive ourselves into thinking that this is a simple or easy process, or that the attempt to reach agreement will always be successful. Priestley was a good scientist, and he knew of Lavoisier's results, but he died still believing in the phlogiston theory, even after most chemists considered it discredited. The fact that intelligent people often can't reach agreement does not show that there is no true or false, no right or wrong.

### III. People sometimes hold conflicting beliefs without any of them being wholly mistaken because they each see different aspects of the same reality.

Suppose you are climbing a mountain from the south and I am climbing the same mountain from the north. The north side of the mountain is covered with evergreen trees; the south side is barren and rocky. On the basis of what I see around me, I judge that the whole mountain is covered with forest; on the basis of what you see, you judge that the whole mountain is barren rock. Here each of us holds a true belief about the part of the mountain we see, but a false belief about the mountain as a whole. Different religions have sometimes been depicted as different paths up the same mountain (whose summit is God, salvation or religious truth); each describes a different path to the summit, and describes it accurately, but there is more to the mountain (the religious life) than any of them realizes; so every religion is in error when it denies the experience of other religions.

The claim here is *not* that each religion is "true for" its believers. It is rather that each religion contains *some* of the (objective, absolute) truth by correctly representing the side of God or religious truth it genuinely experiences. But this also implies that each religion is limited and fallible, containing some falsehood to the extent that it regards itself as complete and in exclusive possession of the truth. The point of the picture might be that each religious tradition deserves respect because it has part of the truth; but it implies equally that the adherents of each religion should be wary of its blind spots and open to the elements of truth in other religions which are missing in their own. This last point, however, is one that a relativist can't make, and is even committed to deny. For since relativists are committed to saying that every person's beliefs are *wholly* true (for that person), there is no room in relativism for the idea that our beliefs are open to correction or completion by considering someone else's viewpoint.

### IV. Fallibilism: We can always be mistaken in what we believe.

Rene Descartes thought that we can be infallible in some of our assertions: for example, that when you attend to your own thinking, your assertion "I think, therefore I exist" could not possibly be mistaken.<sup>(6)</sup> This denies fallibilism, since Descartes holds that some of our beliefs that could not be mistaken. But Descartes thought that many of his own beliefs had turned out to be erroneous and many beliefs we need for everyday life are always going to be somewhat uncertain. He held that we can achieve infallibility only about a few things, and then only if we follow the right philosophical method very cautiously and carefully. Other philosophers, however, such as Charles Sanders Peirce, have disagreed with Descartes, maintaining that we are always going to be fallible in everything we believe (the term "fallibilism" was Peirce's invention).<sup>(7)</sup>

Some relativists seem directly to equate relativism with fallibilism; when you deny relativism (or assert that there is such a thing as absolute truth), they can interpret this only as a denial of fallibilism. But this is a confusion. When you assert that **p**, you take the risk that you will have to take the assertion back if it is shown to be wrong; at the same time you assert that **p**, you commit yourself to the claim that you aren't in fact mistaken in your assertion that **p**, and you risk having to take that back too. But in asserting that **p** you *aren't* thereby committing yourself to saying that your assertion that **p** is infallible and couldn't possibly be proven wrong in the future. If **p** turns out to be false, you don't have any claim of infallibility to take back because you neither made nor implied such a claim when you asserted that **p**. Not only is fallibilism perfectly consistent with holding beliefs about what is (absolutely) true, but fallibilism itself makes sense only if you are prepared to make some assertions about what is absolutely true, since unless you do this there is nothing at all for you to be fallible about.

Actually, it is *relativism* which is committed to denying fallibilism. According to them, they can't be fallible in any of their claims that something is absolutely true (since they make no such claims); nor can they be fallible in anything they believe to be relatively true (true for them) since relativism says that whatever anyone believes is true (for them). Therefore, only non-relativists can be fallibilists, and relativists are committed to being total infallibilists -- infallibilists not merely about a special class of their beliefs (as Descartes is), but infallibilists about all their beliefs whatever.

## 4. Ethical relativism

In § 2 we tried (unsuccessfully) to save relativism from self-refutation by exempting relativism itself from the claim that all truth is relative. We might have better luck if we try admitting that most beliefs (especially scientific or purely factual beliefs) are true or false absolutely, but holding that relativism is nevertheless correct for some limited class of beliefs. Since relativists are often interested in applying their view chiefly to ethical issues, we might try this on *ethical relativism*: There is no absolute truth about ethics, but only relative truth. What I believe is right is right for me, and what you believe is right is right for you. If I think abortion is wrong, then it is true for me that abortion is wrong; if you think abortion is all right, then it is true for you that abortion is all right.

The natural question is: Why pick on ethical beliefs in this way? The answers most often given are two:

- A) People never agree on ethical questions.
- B) There is no way of knowing any absolute truth about ethics.

Critics of (A) and (B) often say that there is more agreement on ethical questions than (A) admits: for instance, when you take account of the differing circumstances and factual beliefs of different cultures, it is not so hard to account for their differing ethical customs and opinions on the basis of a common set of fundamental ethical principles. They also claim that (B) is a wild exaggeration: For who, outside the artificial atmosphere of a philosophical discussion, would seriously claim they doubt that it would be wrong to torture a child to death before its parents eyes just for the fun of it? But even granting both (A) and (B), they don't entail ethical relativism and ethical relativism isn't the only (or even the best) way of accounting for them. (B) seems to assert ethical *skepticism*, which would provide a natural explanation for (A) as well, since if no one knows anything about a subject, then that explains why people have widely differing opinions about it.

When we limit relativism to ethical beliefs, relativism itself no longer has to count as only relatively true, so it looks as if it has been rescued from the threat of self-refutation. But this will turn out to be so only if:

- i) Ethical relativism itself is not an ethical belief.
- ii) Ethical relativism does not share the features of ethical beliefs which make them only relatively true and not absolutely true.

But the relativist's main reason for thinking that ethical beliefs can't be absolutely true is that they are endlessly controversial, and ethical relativism shares this feature with ethical beliefs: people don't agree about ethical relativism either. Moreover, ethical relativists often want to treat ethical relativism as an ethical belief: for instance, they think ethical relativism endorses an commitment to tolerance of people with ethical beliefs different from our own (however, see 6 below.) Therefore, both (i) and (ii) are doubtful. But if either (i) or (ii) is false, then ethical relativism must regard itself as only relatively true, and so it would be self-refuting after all.

In any case, ethical relativism still inherits some serious problems faced by unqualified relativism. They still haven't explained what (if anything) they mean by "true for me". And since an ethical relativist doesn't believe that it's true (absolutely) that killing is wrong, then the ethical relativist doesn't believe that killing is wrong, and so it can't be true for the ethical relativist that killing is wrong. Thus ethical relativists can't consistently have any ethical beliefs of their own.

Once again we may learn something if we look at some other views which might be confused with ethical relativism even though they are quite distinct from (and even incompatible with) it:

### **I. Ethical Skepticism: No ethical belief is certain, all ethical beliefs are unjustified.**

As before, ethical skepticism is the diametrical opposite of ethical relativism, and as before, ethical skepticism is more defensible than ethical relativism. Even so, unqualified ethical skepticism seems exaggerated, to put it mildly. We need only think again of our belief, which no sane person could seriously doubt, that it would be wrong to torture children just for the fun of it.

### **II. Ethical nihilism: All ethical statements are false.**

Ethical statements predicate moral properties ("right," "wrong," "good," "evil," "just," "unjust") of people or actions or social institutions, etc.; but (according to the ethical nihilist) the world does not contain any of these properties; the belief in them is an error or a superstition, like believing in gods or black magic or the bad luck which will happen if you spill the salt. As Nietzsche puts it: "There are altogether no moral facts. Moral judgments agree with religious ones in believing in realities which are no realities. Morality is merely an interpretation of certain phenomena -- more precisely, a misinterpretation." (8) Ethical nihilism and ethical relativism both deny that any ethical beliefs are absolutely true, but ethical nihilism doesn't sugar coat this denial by adding the mysterious qualification that these beliefs are all nevertheless "true for" the person who holds them. Ethical nihilism does have one *problem* in common with ethical relativism: if you are an ethical nihilist, then you are committed to having no ethical beliefs at all, not even beliefs like the one about torturing children cited in the previous paragraph.

### **III. Emotivism: Ethical statements do not make assertions at all, but instead express emotions or attitudes.**

According to the emotivist, ethical statements do not really assert anything that could be true or false. Instead, they express emotions of approval or disapproval, rather like exclamations of joy or distaste. (9) On this view, to say "Kindness is good" is like saying: "Hooray for kindness!" To say "Cruelty is bad" is like saying: "Cruelty -- Yuck!" Imperatives, like exclamations, aren't true or false. So "prescriptivism", a variant of emotivism, holds that ethical statements are not assertions but imperatives: "Killing is wrong" means something like: "Don't kill!". (10) Emotivism has to be different from ethical relativism because ethical relativism says that all ethical beliefs are true (for someone), while emotivism says that no one really has any ethical beliefs at all! Like ethical relativists and ethical nihilists, emotivists can't have any ethical beliefs, but this doesn't bother them because they have ethical sentiments or attitudes instead. For example, emotivists can't *believe* anything about the wrongness of torturing children, but they can have very strong negative *feelings* about such practices and they can try to get others to share their feelings. Emotivists try to reinterpret (what look like) ethical assertions as really disguised expressions of emotion and commands or exhortations to share emotions. On the basis of such reinterpretations they then claim that their view has the advantage that it rids us of the confused and difficult task of justifying moral beliefs but otherwise makes no difference to normative ethics. Accordingly, emotivists subscribe to normative ethical theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism just as they would if they thought these theories involved beliefs about ethical truth. (11) Emotivism is probably the most defensible of the views being considered here; it is still defended by some philosophers, though it is no longer nearly as popular among them as it was earlier in this century.

### **IV. Cultural relativism: Different cultures have different ethical standards and the standards by which the conduct of any individual should be measured are the mores of the community to which that individual belongs. (12)**

## **5. Cultural relativism**

Cultural relativism deserves a separate discussion all to itself. It may not really be a form of relativism at all in the sense we have been using that term. If taken as merely a collectivized form of ethical relativism, then it inherits all the other problems of ethical relativism. And however it is interpreted, cultural relativism seems to share with other forms of relativism the strange notion that some beliefs are true simply in virtue of the fact that they are believed. But cultural relativism could be understood as a version of "subjectivism," which takes moral properties to be reducible to people's subjective beliefs or attitudes. In its simplest form, subjectivism says that "Killing is wrong" means the same as "I disapprove of killing." In a collectivized, cultural relativist form it would say that "Eating meat is wrong" makes sense only when said relative to a certain culture, and then it means "People in this culture disapprove of eating meat". Cultural relativism, however, is sometimes also understood to have substantive normative implications which clearly don't follow from subjectivism by itself. It is taken to imply that there is a single, absolute, objectively right answer to moral questions: If you want to know whether a given action is right or wrong, find out what the agent's culture believes about it. If they think it is right, then it is right; if they think it is wrong then it is wrong. This is the position we should examine.

Anybody who holds that there are (absolute) ethical truths must admit that the rightness or wrongness of an act is relative to the circumstances in which it is performed. Because people's circumstances differ, what is (absolutely, objectively) right for one person, might be different from what is (absolutely, objectively) right for another. For instance, even the most extreme moral absolutist might very well hold that it is right for Joe to have sex with Joe's wife but wrong for Sam to have sex with Joe's wife. Such cases of "right for you, wrong for me" obviously do not support any form of ethical relativism. Cultural relativism could be understood in a similar way, as simply a special view about how moral right and wrong vary with the agent's circumstances. It holds that (absolute, objective) moral rightness and wrongness depend on the prevailing culture's beliefs about a given action. If you want to know the objectively right answer to the question whether a given act is right or wrong, just find out what the agent's culture believes on that question: their belief determines what is objectively true.

Accordingly, a moral judgment such as "Joe's killing Sam was wrong" would be like the judgment "It is raining" in that both have implicit reference to a context which determines their objective truth. "It is raining" always means that it is raining at a certain time and place (e.g. in Peoria at 6 pm on September 12, 1994). "Joe's killing Sam was wrong" means that Joe's killing of Sam was wrong in a certain culture at a certain time (e.g. in white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Eastern seaboard American culture in the mid 1990s, where acts like Joe's act of killing are widely disapproved). Cultural relativism then holds that what a culture believes about an act determines the truth about its objective rightness or wrongness in something like the way that spatio-temporal location determines the truth about the weather conditions obtaining then and there.

**Cultural relativism and the affirmation of cultural diversity.** Much of the appeal of cultural relativism has come from the perception that different cultures have different moral standards and moral practices from ours, but nevertheless get along at least as well with their standards and practices as we do with ours. This perception is often conjoined with the idea that it is wrong for Western culture to be intolerant of other cultures and impose its ways on them. But this idea does not imply cultural relativism, and is probably even inconsistent with it. Probably the intended connection between cultural relativism and cultural tolerance is based on an argument of the following kind:

1. We shouldn't blame or interfere with actions that are objectively right.
2. The actions generally approved in other cultures are objectively right just because they are generally approved there. (Cultural relativism)
3. Therefore, we should not blame or interfere with the actions of people in other cultures when they are generally approved in those cultures.

But can a cultural relativist consistently put forward such an argument?

Cultural relativists often charge that among the ethical beliefs of Western culture is something like belief (W):

W Western values should be imposed on other cultures, and members of Western culture should blame and interfere with the actions of people in other cultures whenever these actions violate Western values.

If the cultural relativists are right that (W) is a belief of Western culture, then what cultural relativism tells us as members of Western culture is that it is absolutely, objectively right for us to impose our ways on others and objectively right for us to blame and interfere with the actions of people in other cultures whenever our values condemn them. That means that cultural relativism supports not (3) but its contradictory.

Further, what account can a cultural relativist consistently give of the ethical principle stated in (1)? If the principle is supposed to have absolute or trans-cultural validity, how can this be consistent with cultural relativism? If the principle is valid merely because it is one of our culture's ethical beliefs, then it deserves no priority over (W). And then it looks as if (1) and (W) taken together imply the falsity of (2) (that is, of cultural relativism). In that case, cultural relativism is self-refuting for us (and for the members of any culture whose ethical beliefs happen to be incompatible with cultural relativism). Cultural relativism is therefore incapable of combatting any form of culturally entrenched imperialism, racism or ethnocentrism. For whenever we find these ugly things built into a culture's beliefs, cultural relativism is committed to endorsing them; and if cultural relativism is interpreted in such a way as to conflict with these beliefs, then it becomes self-refuting in that culture.

In practice, cultural relativism is sometimes used as a pretext for following whatever ethical beliefs one finds convenient. For instance, a Western-based multinational corporation operating in other parts of the world comes from a culture which believes that it is all right to seek the highest profit you can within the law; cultural relativism says they may do that (even if it means disrupting the traditions of that culture). But cultural relativism also says that they need not blame or interfere with practices within that culture which might be considered wrong in their own culture: practices such as police-state terror directed against workers who protest the brutally low wage scales and miserable working conditions through which the corporations reap their profits. For these corporations, cultural relativism is just fine and dandy.

These results suggest that cultural relativism doesn't do justice to the actual views of those who really want to promote cross-cultural tolerance or oppose Western imperialism. It looks like those views really consist in holding to certain (absolute, objective, trans-cultural) ethical principles about how the members of different cultures should act toward each other, such as that people should be open-minded and tolerant to all human beings, always treating them with dignity and respect. Perhaps the anti-imperialists are embarrassed to avow such principles because they obviously come from the modern, Western enlightenment tradition, and avowing them will immediately expose you to the dreaded charge of ethnocentrism. By contrast, cultural relativism's principled stance of absolute cross-cultural neutrality seems to buy us immunity from this charge. But of course cultural relativism is a modern Western idea as much as any moral principle they might have chosen; the only difference is that, as we have seen, cultural relativism is actually hostile to cross-cultural tolerance and mutual respect, whereas certain other Western enlightenment principles do favor them.

Very likely we end up in this paradoxical position because we start from the correct perception that everyone's standpoint is limited by their cultural perspective, and then (directly contradicting this insight) we try immediately to occupy a sublimely neutral standpoint which is above all such limitations. We might be wiser to align ourselves with some standpoint situated within a definite culture which, despite its inevitable limitations, at least makes an effort to be critical of itself and tolerant of other cultural standpoints. We are reluctant to take this wise course because we know that it is hard to identify such a standpoint; we realize that the biases from which we start will doubtless lead us into mistakes, probably culpable ones; and we are aware that by this route we can never hope altogether to escape the accusation of ethnocentrism, but will just have to learn to live with it (as part of our human condition).

We find cultural relativism far more appealing because its empty gestures enable us to announce our good intentions and repudiate our cultural biases in the abstract, with a mere wave of the hand. It enables us to absolve ourselves all of our cultural limitations in general without ever having to overcome any of them in particular. But perhaps what we have really wanted all along is a license to behave like brutal, arrogant imperialists while at the same time thinking of ourselves as tolerant, humane cosmopolitans who have transcended all their cultural prejudices. This makes it unsurprising that cultural relativism has had widespread appeal among the more sophisticated members of Western imperialist culture.

**Difficulties in accepting cultural relativism.** Even if it lived up to its billing, cultural relativism would still be extremely implausible. It commits you to the objective rightness (in the context of the culture in question) of all the moral beliefs and practices which have ever existed. Slavery was objectively right in ancient Greece and Rome, and even in our own country not so long ago. Human sacrifices were objectively right for the Aztecs; so was the Indian custom of *suttee*, requiring a widow to burn herself to death on her husband's funeral pyre; and also the *pogrom* -- the periodic indiscriminate slaughter of Jews -- which has long been part of the folkways of Christian peoples in Europe. Also objectively right is the sexual mutilation of women, which is still practiced in a variety of cultures. Cultural relativists sometimes refuse to back down even when presented with the most outrageous and grisly cases; but I can't help thinking that if they hadn't been backed into this position by the stance they hastily chose in a philosophical discussion, these same people would be the first to condemn these practices as strongly as anyone.

The moral problems cultural relativism is trying to address are certainly real ones. In many cases it is simply not obvious what we should do (or even think) when confronted by practices of another culture which offend our moral sense and contradict our deepest convictions. Some things that people do to one another in different cultures are quite evidently the results of wretched superstitions and the brutally unjust distributions of power and authority which are traditional in those societies. On the other hand, we can often see that in other cultures certain actions have a different meaning, and we are quite aware that we lack the capacity to understand and evaluate the practices of alien societies. If we do nothing in the face of evident moral evil, we completely forfeit our integrity; but if we act on the basis of convictions held from our admittedly incomplete perspective, then we run the risk of arrogantly setting ourselves up as infallible moral judges of people who may know more than we do about what is being judged. If traditional cultures in other parts of the world are changing so that they become more like modern Western culture in ways we approve, should we applaud and support this process as the victory of moral progress, or should we deplore, regret and oppose these changes because they amount to the violent extinction of that culture's priceless heritage? What is objectionable about cultural relativism is that it pretends to have found a simple, general, tidy and unambiguous answer to questions where any answer of that description is almost certainly wrong.

**Difficulties in applying cultural relativism.** Another problem with cultural relativism is that the general criterion of right and wrong which it proposes is actually very unhelpful because it is inherently unclear and impossible to apply in the real world. Cultural relativism tells us that the rightness of an act depends on what the agent's culture believes about it. But most societies today are a complex network of cultures and subcultures, sometimes having widely divergent moral beliefs about controversial issues. For a given person in a given situation, how are we supposed to decide which culture or subculture the person belongs to? How many different cultures, for instance, are represented among the students in this course? How many of us can be entirely sure what culture we ourselves belong to? Can people set up a new culture whenever they want to? How few people would it take to do this?

In most cultures (our own, for instance), many ethical questions are the subject of endless disagreement and debate (this, after all, was what got ethical relativism started in the first place). How are we to determine what the ethical beliefs of the prevailing culture are? Does this require an overwhelming consensus among the culture's members, or is it a matter of simple majority vote? Or does cultural relativism imply that the most old-fashioned and ethnically traditional moral opinion is always the right one? Wherever there is any intra-cultural disagreement at all, the effect of cultural relativism will be to support the dominant view within the culture and to de-legitimize all dissenting views without giving them so much as a hearing. Cultural relativism implies that on any moral question within a culture an opinion is always necessarily wrong whenever it goes against traditional beliefs in the culture which are still very widely held. That means not only that those individuals who raise moral questions about accepted practices are always in the wrong, but also that any movement for moral reform within a culture, even if it eventually succeeds, must have been in the wrong at the time it got started, and therefore that it must always be absolutely wrong to try to reform any culture's accepted moral beliefs and practices.

Cultural relativism seems to give plausible answers to ethical questions only in a culture (utterly unlike our own) which is homogeneous, unreflective, unchangeable and free of serious moral disagreements. Ironically, the very social complexities, mutabilities and controversies which make relativism attractive also render it useless, unclear and implausible as an account of ethical truth

## 6. Is relativism the opposite of dogmatism?

Why does relativism appeal to people? They are often attracted to relativism because they think it expresses and supports attitudes of open-mindedness and tolerance, and that the rejection of relativism commits you to arrogant dogmatism and narrow-mindedness. Since the opposite of "relative" is "absolute," the opposite of "relativism" seems to be "absolutism", a word which usually connotes "authoritarianism" or "dogmatism". Besides, dogmatism and intolerance always seem to be based on the idea that I am right and the other is wrong about something. But if everyone's belief is equally true (because "true for them"), then there never could be any occasion to think that I am any more (or less) right than anyone else about anything. Consequently, it seems to follow that there could never be any possible reason for treating anyone with hostility or disrespect if they hold a belief different from mine.

If you want to avoid a bad thing, however, it isn't always a good idea to fly to the opposite extreme, since that might turn out to be just as bad. If "absolutism" is bad and "relativism" is its opposite, it still doesn't follow that relativism will be good. However, it is not clear that relativism really is the opposite thing from authoritarianism, dogmatism, closed-mindedness and intolerance. In fact, it may not even be a different thing.

Relativism never declares any belief absolutely true or false; this may make us think that it is open-minded. But to be open-minded is to be disposed to think that you are fallible, that you could be mistaken in what you believe (so that what you now think is absolutely true might on closer examination turn out to be absolutely false). This is a thought which a relativist can never have, because relativists are convinced that at any time all their beliefs are necessarily true (for them). You show open-mindedness by leaving open the possibility of changing your beliefs (coming to disagree with what you used to believe) when you are given good reasons to. But relativists can never have any reason for changing their beliefs, since relativism says that at every point their beliefs are already true (for them). Of course relativism doesn't give anyone a reason for *not* changing their beliefs, since if I just happen to change my beliefs, then relativism says that my new belief is just as true (for me) as, but no truer (for me) than my old belief was. In short, relativism implies that that the right attitude toward our beliefs is always one of total self-complacency.

Relativism is anti-authoritarian only in the sense that it takes away any reason you might have for considering the opinions and arguments of others in forming your beliefs (for instance, the opinion of someone better informed than you are). For relativism says that your beliefs are all true (for you) no matter what anyone else may say or think. Relativism thus undercuts any reason anyone might have for being critical about their own beliefs. As we have already noted, relativism implies that you are always *infallible* in whatever you believe. The closed-minded arrogance of this view is not diminished by saying, in effect, that everyone else is infallible too. This merely adds to my own dogmatism the proviso that it is all right for everyone else to be just as dogmatic as I am.

Tolerance is the willingness to let others be different from us, especially to let them disagree with us, even if they are wrong. Relativism cuts way down on the *need* to be tolerant, since it denies that anyone is ever wrong. But this doesn't make the relativist tolerant (for exactly the same reason that successfully fleeing from danger doesn't make you courageous). It is as if relativists can't even conceive of actually *tolerating* those they think are in the wrong, and the closest thing to this that they are capable of imagining is the principled refusal ever to admit that anyone could ever be wrong about anything. But relativism does not altogether eliminate the need for tolerance because people can be intolerant not only of those whose beliefs they think are wrong, but also of those who differ from them in other ways (in skin color, customs and folkways, or emotional sensibilities) even when the difference involves no disagreement in beliefs. And when the need for tolerance does arise, relativism provides no reason at all for being tolerant rather than intolerant. If I believe it is wrong to hate people who differ from me, relativism tells me that that belief is true (for me); but equally, if I believe in persecuting others, then relativism tells me that this belief is also true for me. In short, relativism is just exactly as likely to encourage intolerance as it is to encourage tolerance. But this is precisely what we should have expected. In saying that every belief is true for the person who holds it, relativism is absolutely neutral between all pairs of opposed beliefs. But that entails directly that relativism is absolutely neutral between the belief in tolerance and the belief in intolerance.

What this shows is simply that tolerance is not the same thing as neutrality. Tolerance requires some positive convictions about why, when and to what extent we should let people believe and do what we take to be wrong. Relativism can never support or even admit any convictions of this kind, because it can't even admit that anything is ever wrong.

**Relativism and Moral Conservatism.** Religious or political conservatives or traditionalists often attack "relativism". Such attacks probably encourage the idea that "relativism" is the right name for any view which is open-minded, tolerant, liberal and progressive. But what the traditionalists are usually opposing is not relativism in the sense we have been discussing here. Their target is typically one or more of the following views:

1. Traditionally accepted moral principles may not be correct; this is at least something about which intelligent people may disagree.
2. Which moral principles are correct is subject to change with time and circumstances.
3. Moral principles apply differently to different circumstances, so that what is right for one person in one situation can be wrong for another person in a different situation.
4. There are sometimes justified exceptions to a correct moral principle.
5. Even if an accepted moral principle is correct, we should sometimes be tolerant of people who disagree with it and refuse to follow it.

All these positions are "relativistic" in that they question the inflexible application of traditional morality and argue that moral questions be looked at from new perspectives. But none of these positions involves denying (or even doubting) that there are absolute moral truths; none maintains that whatever anyone believes is true for them. On the contrary, all these positions presuppose that there is truth in moral matters, since they challenge traditional ideas about which principles are objectively correct, how certain we can be about this, whether moral truth can change, and how flexible we should be in adapting moral principles to different situations. Those who want to defend such views should not let traditionalists get away with suggesting that they are vulnerable to the charges of incoherence and self-refutation which can be brought against relativism.

Relativism itself is a very conservative position. Cultural relativism, as we have seen, tends to lend uncritical support to dominant cultural views and practices. Those who want to question or criticize traditional creeds and values at least have to admit that they might be wrong. But since relativism holds that everyone's belief is already true (for them), it implies that there is never really any need for anyone to change their views about anything.

You don't have to attack the very notion of objective truth in order to challenge traditional ideas about what it is, where it is to be found, or whose views have to be taken into account in looking for it. On the contrary, it is only by presupposing that there is such a truth that you can legitimize challenges to mistaken ideas about what it is and how it should be sought. In fact, since absolute truth is not truth for anyone in particular, this implies that *everyone's* standpoint needs to be taken into account in searching for it.

**Relativism as an intellectual defense mechanism.** It is really *relativism* that commits you to ignoring the opinions of others, since relativism says that whatever you believe is true for you irrespective of anyone else. In effect, relativism marginalizes everybody's standpoint except your own. But just this may constitute the appeal of relativism. When I begin the study of philosophy, I may suddenly discover powerful arguments and theories I never considered before which challenge the opinions I have always taken for granted. This can be very disturbing, and make me feel intimidated and insecure. Relativism comes to the rescue by protecting my opinions (making them all "true for me"). Because relativism is absolutely neutral between all particular opinions, it enables me to remain above the fray, taking the high ground away from those who, by lobbying for their particular version of the absolute truth, make it all too obvious that they have an axe to grind. As a relativist I never have to bother with the frustrating details of any philosophical dispute because relativism explains to me ahead of time not only why the dispute will never get resolved, but also why this is perfectly all right. I can agree that inquiry, reasoning and argument are fine (if someone happens to feel like paying attention to them), but I can rest assured that they need never seriously threaten my own beliefs (which remain true for me however the arguments come out).

In this way relativism will encourage the one kind of tolerance for which I have the most desperate need: tolerance toward my own intellectual cowardice, laziness and incompetence. And when it protects me against all those whose powerful arguments might threaten my comfortable little world of convictions, relativism also makes me think I am tolerant toward others, since it releases me from the need to experience their alternative views as a threat to mine, and hence from the need to resist their arguments or to argue back: I can just live and let live. Both the appeal of relativism and its claim to tolerance would then be found in the way it immunizes my dogmatically held opinions against any facts or reasonings that might possibly call them into question.

## NOTES

1. Plato, *Theaetetus*, tr. J. McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 152A.
2. Plato, *Theaetetus* 152B.
3. Plato, *Theaetetus* 160C.
4. Plato, *Theaetetus* 161C-162A.
5. See Henry Guerlac, *Lavoisier: The Crucial Year* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).
6. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, tr. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), pp. 17 and 61.
7. See C.S. Peirce, "The Scientific Attitude and Fallibilism," *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, edited by J. Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), pp. 42-59.
8. W. Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 501.
9. See C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944) and A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1946), pp. 102-115.
10. See R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).
11. But can they really preserve everything about normative ethics that they want to? See Nicholas Sturgeon, "What Difference Does It Make if Moral Realism Is True?" *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986).
12. For some defences, criticisms and other discussions of ethical relativism, see Edward Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (New York: Humanities Press, 1960); Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1959), pp. 98-105, 285-286; David Wong, *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985; and Richard Miller, *Moral Differences* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992).