



SHOULD WE BELIEVE IN MORAL REALISM? ON THE BURDEN OF JUSTIFICATION OF MORAL REALISM IN MORAL DISAGREEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Moral realism and moral relativism are two influential dogmas in moral philosophy. This paper examines relativism's possible position and the burden of justification of a particular form of realism in the problem of moral disagreement. This paper concludes that neither position is morally acceptable, and this paper further offers a hint to a middle way: moral pragmatism.

Keywords: *moral realism; moral relativism; moral disagreement;*

INTRODUCTION

“Thou shalt not lie;” you can lie in certain scenarios. Abortion is permissible; abortion is not permissible. You can sacrifice the life of one to save the world; you cannot sacrifice one’s life in any scenario. Moral disagreements prevail in our life. From the debates in principle to disputes around social events, people don’t lack disagreements. Many philosophers strive to find out ways to rationally resolve these disagreements, while others contend that ultimate agreements are not realizable.

Moral Realism believes that mind-independence moral truths exist, and hence people can resolve disagreements after discovering the eternal, absolute moral truths. On the other hand, Moral Relativism argues that there’s no such objective, universal, absolute moral truth or principle, as morality itself is the product of different cultures under particular cultural or social context. For this very reason, relativists consider the ideal of finding universal moral facts to transcend moral disagreements, formed by radical cultural differences, like a destined failure.

Two theories demonstrate a radical difference in handling the problem of moral disagreements. On one hand, moral relativists emphasize the priority of moral plurality, and different value systems may rationally have incompatible moral beliefs. On the other hand, realists argue that people can ultimately form moral agreements through understanding the mind-independent moral facts.

This paper firstly states a challenge to Moral Relativism’s position in moral disagreement. Then, this paper reconstructs David O Brink’s refutations to Moral Relativism and argues that these objections cannot be answered by relativists. In the third part, this paper examines Moral Realism’s proposal, especially two exceptions of moral disagreements, and argues that it demands a high burden of justification, which is unlikely to be achieved. Finally, the paper concludes that a viable theory must settle a middle way between the absoluteness of moral realism and complete relativity of moral relativism to address moral disagreements.



1. MORAL RELATIVISM AND MORAL DISAGREEMENTS

In “The Argument From Relativity,” Mackie expresses the following idea: unlike scientific disagreements resulting from speculative inference based on inadequate evidence, moral disagreements reflect people’s adherence to “different ways of life (127).”

Relativists, as Mackie exemplifies, believe that social, cultural, geopolitical contexts and different ways of life generate diverse moral beliefs and moral values. For instance, as Confucianism is rooted in the traditional relationship of family and clan structure in China, Western Individualism is caused by its particular historical contexts, and Greek’s virtue of courage is attributed to the very nature of Marine civilization...

Although physicists currently disagree on scientific disputes such as quantum mechanics or string theory, people can still rationally believe that physicists will ultimately reach mutual agreements on these problems. This belief is intuitive because people associate science and scientific method with “objectivity,” and scientific knowledge should provide explanations that correspond with an external, objective world and natural facts. Moral knowledge appears to be very different, however. As Mackie persuasively contends, the transformations of moral obligation in human history demonstrate the constructive nature of morality. Indeed, if there are universal moral facts, why different nations, civilizations, and cultures’ beliefs are so different? Moreover, why did the moral beliefs within the same country change throughout the course of history?

I reconstruct relativists’ opinions in the problem of moral disagreements as follows:

(1) If there are abundant, radical cultural differences and moral disagreements, morality is the product of different ways of life.

(2) There are abundant, radical cultural differences and moral disagreements.

(C1) Morality is the product of different ways of life.

(3) If morality is the product of different ways of life, then we should reject moral facts and hence moral realism.

(C1) \cup (3)

(C2) We should reject moral facts and hence moral realism.

Williams expresses a similar idea as he distinguishes moral knowledge and scientific knowledge into two categories: moral knowledge is about action, not about the world itself. Therefore, moral realists cannot provide a sufficient foundation to justify the objectivity of moral knowledge (131). Rawls is even more radical—for Rawls, the very idea of moral relativity indicates that at least some radical disagreements of moral principles are not rationally resolvable, leading to the inability for philosophers to reach ultimate agreements (223-224). For instance, a Utilitarian will never agree with Kantian’s categorical imperative of “thou shalt not lie,” while a Kantian will never agree with the method of utilitarian calculation since it treats the value of people as quantifiable.

What does relativists’ approach mean at the normative level? In other words, if we accept relativism, how should we deal with moral disagreements in reality?

The most typical idea is the doctrine of tolerance: since different moral paradigms between different cultures are incommensurable, a moral agent in one culture does not have a justified reason to criticize the moral practice or moral values held by a distant culture. Similarly, no culture has the supreme position that can demand other cultures to accept its value system. Put this conception into an idiom: you go your way, and I go my way. The doctrine of tolerance becomes the cornerstone of liberalism, which is also called “passive freedom.” In “The Pursuit of The Ideal,” Berlin argues that relativism, or pluralism in his phrase, drives people to transcend the Platonic ideal that demands an absolute, universal



truth. After abandoning this illusion, people are able to imagine a pluralistic ideal: every culture identifies the commonality with other cultures while respecting the difference (195).

Rawls further proposes two fundamental principles of action for relativists. Firstly, a reasonable agent must admit that moral systems produced by different cultures have boundaries, so one should not impose his or her own moral beliefs on others' moral contexts; secondly, a reasonable agent is not justified to use political power to suppress others' rational moral beliefs (226).

2. WHY RELATIVISTS' APPROACH IS PROBLEMATIC

To save moral truths from the attack of relativism, O. Brink firstly distinguishes two different kinds of moral disagreements: apparent moral disagreements and genuine moral disagreements (159). The former is the different exemplifications of the same moral belief under specific contexts. For example, developed countries and developing countries have diverse social welfare systems, but they may represent the same moral belief behind them. From the perspective of a developed country, certain practices in developing countries may be immoral because the means to realize the same end are seemingly different. Genuine moral disagreements, however, are more fundamental. They are the clashes of incompatible moral principles: Kantianism v Utilitarianism; Virtue Ethics v Deontic Ethics; Hedonism v Stoicism...¹

For apparent disagreements, realists deny (1): If there are abundant, radical cultural differences and moral disagreements, morality is the product of different ways of life. The first premise is too arbitrary since it fails to distinguish apparent disagreements from genuine ones. In fact, if people collectively realize that some moral disagreements, which are seemingly created by cultural differences, actually represent the same moral principle, people are likely to form moral agreements in practice. Moreover, apparent disagreements may depend on non-moral facts. For instance, moral agents possibly hold diverse information, self-interest, bias, and epistemic status about the same event. As a result, the disagreements on non-moral facts prevent people from reaching moral facts and hence moral agreements.

For realists, the existence of current apparent disagreements does not imply the impossibility of moral truth for the apparent disagreements is on the epistemic level. Instead, people should realize that various means in moral practice are multiple faces of the same moral principle.

After realizing the commonality of shared moral principles, reasonable moral agents can further meditate on how other cultures, societies, and political environments realize the moral principles in their unique practical contexts. Through this reflective practice of moral imagination based on the shared moral value, people will ultimately transcend practical divergence and reach mutual agreements. For instance, after gathering sufficient information and engaging in moral discourse, people in China are able to understand the legitimacy of the social welfare system in the Nordic Council and how the moral principle of "equality" is realized. Therefore, for apparent disagreements, (1) is problematic.

¹ One may challenge this distinction by arguing it's impossible to distinguish in fact between apparent and genuine moral disagreements in practice since any so-called genuine moral disagreements could be discovered in the future not to be a dilemma at all (e.g., slavery). However, the distinction is a metaphysical one rather than an epistemic one.

Therefore, whether people in practice can distinguish between apparent and genuine disagreements does not challenge the classification.



As apparent moral disagreements fail to attack moral realism, relativists may suggest genuine moral disagreements are resolvable if and only if there are common agreements on moral principles that are prior to epistemic facts. However, since there are no such agreements on moral principles, genuine moral disagreements are not resolvable. I believe that we can summarize this argument in the following form:

(4) If people do not share agreements on moral principles as these principles are internally justified, then genuine disagreements are not rationally resolvable.

(5) People do not share agreements on moral principles as these principles are internally justified.

(C3) Genuine Disagreements are not rationally resolvable.

There are at least three objections to this argument. To begin with, realists can challenge (5). Relativists' justification of (5) rests on the principle of internal justification: a moral value "Ψ" is and only is justified within the paradigm "Ψ." According to this view, a moral agent is not justified to critique the Chinese Confucian ideal from the standing point of Western tradition since the Confucian ideal is internally justified within its own system of beliefs.

So far relativists only justify *within a paradigm*, not a *justification of a paradigm*, which is necessary to preserve the moral significance of moral beliefs. People do not demand agreements of preference since they are insignificant. Apple and banana, which is better? Dog and cat, which is cuter? Each position is only internally justified by its believer, but each belief hence becomes insignificant. Consequently, if relativists want to prevent morality from reducing to propositions of trivial preference, they must provide justification of the paradigm itself, which requires a shared horizon.

To illustrate the relationship between significance and common horizon, let's suppose Wilson says, "the meaning of people's life is to waggle their toes 42 times per day." Without extra explanation by Wilson, others have reason to regard this assertion as epistemically ridiculous or unreasonable; however, in this scenario, moral relativists counterintuitively suggest that people should not make judgments regarding Wilson's assertion. If Wilson does explain to support the assertion to make it morally significant and reasonable, he has created a common horizon for moral discourse, exposing the assertion to public critique, discourse, and debates. This analogy points out that the moral significance is grounded in a shared horizon that enables people to discourse, critique, and debate. It is the intersubjective agreements of a higher-order system with broad publicity that justify the moral beliefs of a narrower system. Therefore, the principle of internal justification is implausible as it reduces moral values to trivial, private preference.

Secondly, relativism rests on a problematic assumption: for incompatible moral beliefs, a moral agent ought to suspend his or her judgment, as implied by the principle of tolerance. One should neither accept others' moral values nor impose own values on other cultures. To begin with, from an epistemic perspective, if we regard people from an alien culture as our epistemic peers, it is rational for us to weaken previous beliefs when there're moral conflicts (Rowland, 87). It is precise because of the demand of the principle of tolerance, people should respect alien cultures' moral values and treat their believers as epistemically capable peers. However, unlike relativists' demand to suspend the judgment, it is more epistemically plausible for people to adjust their beliefs or at least to reduce their level of confidence. For example, when 99 out of 100 epistemically capable peers provide



opposite answers to Henry, Henry has reasonable motivation to change or at least reconsider his answer to the question².

Moreover, relativists' suspension of judgment implies the impossibility for people to genuinely criticize or support other moral paradigms as no paradigm has epistemic priority. Consequently, the Nazi's massacre in Auschwitz is morally free from blame because it was internally justified, the only demand of justification for relativism, in Germany's domestic contexts. In other words, moral relativism implies an absurd conclusion: we cannot criticize the Nazi's atrocity as it was justified within the paradigm.

Thirdly, Brink suggests (4) is a one-way view: only moral principles justify the moral judgments in practice, and this relationship is not reversible (Brink, 162). However, people's moral judgments formed in practice constantly adjust people's moral consensuses. As these consensuses expand in practice, people ultimately will reach agreements in principle, which refer to moral truths.

3. REALISM'S BURDEN OF JUSTIFICATION

So far, realists refute the argument of moral relativity from the levels of apparent moral disagreements and genuine moral disagreements and point out two repugnant consequences of moral relativism. Does it mean realism is saved? Not necessarily.

So far realists only indicate the implausibility of treating morality as merely relative, mutually incommensurable social, historical, and cultural products. However, realists haven't justified genuine disagreements are rationally resolvable and hence people can reach moral truths. Now I'll examine the burden of justification of realism to fully justify its position.

Brink argues two exceptions should be excluded from the responsibility of justification: (a) Some interlocutors in moral discourse may have systematically mistake moral system that it's impossible to convince them of true moral claims; (b) moral ties are possible and some objective values themselves may be incommensurable (Brink, 166).³

Therefore, moral realism's responsibility of justification in the problem of genuine moral disagreements is:

(R1): Genuine moral disagreements are resolvable, with systematical defects and moral ties of objective moral values excluded from the discussion.

Anti-realists are welcomed to accept the first part of this idea: moral realism should justify the resolvability of genuine moral disagreements; however, they may rationally reject the second section and insist that realists must discuss how moral agreements are possible in two exceptions.

Consider the first exception: some interlocutors may have systematically mistaken beliefs that it's impossible to convince them of true moral claims. Suppose A tries to converse with B, a holder of a particular epistemic and moral paradigm. A's a conceptual scheme, the epistemic pattern to perceive the world, is radically different from B's, so A's epistemic and moral beliefs and B's beliefs have nothing in common. In this case, "apple" might be an edible fruit from A's point of view, while the term "apple" is a nonsensical expression φ , or even epistemically inconceivable, within B's alien conceptual scheme. If

² The principle of tolerance of relativism is even self-defeating. The relativists cannot assert any moral principle as anything but relative. Then, if one culture disapproves of tolerance, as it clearly does, tolerance is unjustified.

³ The motivation to devise two exceptions is understandable. Although moral realism only demands the existence of moral truths, its establishment requires epistemic accessibility. If these mind-independent moral truths are inaccessible to moral agents, moral realism fails to satisfy the accessibility requirement and hence becomes an empty theory.



this is the case, A indeed has no way to understand B's language since the understanding of the language demands the shared beliefs about the world, but A also has no reason to treat B as a person who has the proper usage of language. Therefore, the objection to the first exception is:

(i) If there are systematically mistaken or incommensurable moral paradigms and epistemic conceptual schemes, then moral paradigms and conceptual schemes are mutually untranslatable.

(ii) Moral paradigms and conceptual schemes are mutually inter-translatable.

(iii) There are no systematically mistaken or incommensurable moral paradigms and epistemic conceptual schemes.

(iv) There are no systematically mistaken or incommensurable moral paradigms and epistemic conceptual schemes \equiv there are no first exceptions.

(v) There are no first exceptions.

The most important premise of this argument is (ii). The very fact that we can translate English to Chinese and from Chinese to English rests on a prerequisite: we share the same conceptual scheme to perceive the way. It does not require Chinese and American to share every belief. What inter-translation requires is moderate—general convergence of the conceptual schemes. On the contrary, if a linguist tries to translate a bat's language, he or she is destined to fail as they have fundamentally different conceptual frameworks. Bats may have subtle expressions to certain stimuli beyond human knowledge, so the human linguist has no way to genuinely understand bats' expressions. A human linguist might regard these subtle expressions as natural behavior, but certainly, they cannot be regarded as a rule-governed public language (Elgin, 93).

Therefore, if F is a systematically mistaken interlocutor, people have no reason to treat F as a person since the conceptual scheme is radically different. The commonality between an ordinary person and an F is nothing more than that between a person and a bat (Nagel, 437-442). An "agent" with a systematically mistaken system is impossible. What is possible to happen in reality is an agent's conceptual system is not epistemically responsible (e.g., a person lacks rationality or with epistemic handicap). However, these insufficient circumstances should be discussed by moral realists since they are so common. Therefore, realists should exclude the first exception. Now, the responsibility of justification becomes:

(R2): Genuine moral disagreements are rationally resolvable unless there are moral ties of objective, incompatible moral values.

We should eliminate the second exception as well. To begin with, it harms the strength of moral realism. It does not follow that moral realism is necessarily incompatible with the idea of moral plurality. Realists do not need to suppose moral truths to be monotonic and determined as suggested by the Platonic Heaven. Moral realism, however, should provide an achievable methodology to resolve genuine disagreements, otherwise, its theory does not have explanatory power compared with relativism. In fact, as Mackie suggested, when moral realism is forced to admit the moral ties in moral disagreements, anti-realists' interpretation of morality as the social construct of unique cultural contexts has stronger explanatory power.

Secondly, the incommensurability of objective moral values is a strong epistemic demand, perhaps too strong. Incommensurability, according to Kuhn, is a concept about different paradigms. Kuhn believes that physicists in the quantum era are unable to genuinely understand or evaluate Newton mechanics because the paradigm has shifted. Therefore, (1) incommensurability is not a term that applies to specific moral beliefs, but different



paradigms; (2) incommensurability demands not only a lack of convergence between different paradigms but also an impossibility to genuinely comprehend other paradigms (Elgin, 78-79).

In other words, realists need to justify those different cultures that possess diverse paradigms cannot mutually understand each other. This argument is too strong. The inter-translatability of languages provides empirical evidence that there are no incommensurable conceptual schemes (Davidson, 185-190). Although Western individualism does not agree with many practices of Eastern collectivism, a reasonable moral agent at least can understand what collectivism requires through moral imagination. The behavior of disagreement itself shows this truth: without such understanding of the opponent's belief, the action of disagreement reduces to an arbitrary, irrational behavior.

Thirdly, there are multiple ways to respond. Realists may argue that seemingly unresolvable moral ties are the consequence of vague questions. People can further specify "What is X" in order to reach moral convergence (Nussbaum, 173). Rather than asking "what is justice" in theory, people ought to ask what the practice of justice is and how to realize the ideal under particular social, cultural, and political contexts.

Due to the aforementioned reasons, moral realists need not and should not exclude the moral ties from their justification. However, as the second objection implies, moral ties do not have unique characteristics (incommensurability) that differ from moral disagreements, so we can combine the discussions of moral ties with those of moral disagreements. Consequently, the responsibility of justification for realism in the problem of moral disagreements is:

(R3) Genuine moral disagreements are rationally resolvable.⁴

The burden of justification is heavy to bear. Realism not only needs to justify the resolvability of genuine moral disagreements but also needs to provide a practical methodology to realize the process to reach the moral truth.

Indeed, perhaps the most optimistic realists will doubt whether their ideal is achievable. Or maybe the realist picture is but a naive fantasy. It is hardly believable that such responsibility of justification is more than a theoretical possibility and can be fulfilled.

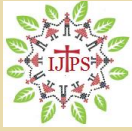
CONCLUSION

In the second section, I reconstruct a typical position of moral relativism on the problem of moral disagreements.

Then, In the third section, I point out three flaws of moral relativism. First of all, the justification within a paradigm is insufficient to secure the moral significance, so moral beliefs are not solely justified within their frameworks. Secondly, moral relativism does not fit our intuition of epistemic peers and causes a repugnant conclusion that we are forced to accept certain inhumane moral systems as (internally) justified. Finally, moral relativism

⁴ A moderate realist can use "may be resolvable" instead of "are resolvable" because there is no way to really know that any given moral dilemma is resolvable unless it is resolved. Consequently, it would be impossible for realists to prove that a given moral disagreement *is* resolvable. Just as in mathematics some truths cannot be proven, so the same is true in morality. As Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem suggests, any complex theory is incomplete containing truths that cannot be verified (Kim, 20).

However, as the accessibility requirement implies, the very idea of moral truths lies in the possible moral convergence. Therefore, "may be resolvable" is insufficient for moral realism to truly establish the accessibility of moral truths as it implies the convergence may not happen, metaphysically and epistemically speaking.



rests on a narrow one-way view that disregards the reverse relationship between moral judgments and moral principles.

Although moral relativism should be rejected, moral realism's stance is not justified so far. After revising realists' responsibility of judgment, I point out that realists need to justify the resolvability of genuine moral disagreements and provide a feasible methodology to reach moral convergence and hence moral truths. The justification is highly demanding.

In the challenge of moral disagreements, people on one hand are reluctant to accept moral relativism's repugnant consequence and its flaw of internal justification; on the other hand, people cannot genuinely trust that realism's strong responsibility of justification goes beyond the theoretical possibility. From the conflict between virtue ethics and deontic ethics to that between Kantianism and Utilitarianism, the history of philosophy seems to illustrate the failure of moral realism to find the objective moral truth. Now, the dichotomy between moral realism and moral relativism seems to repeat the fruitless quest as both theories are too extreme to prevent morality from the challenge of moral disagreements.

There are merits of the two extremes, though. From the problems of moral relativism, we learn that a tenable moral theory does not appeal to internal justification to establish moral values. Instead, moral values must be justified through the moral discourse of a common horizon that is accessible to all moral agents. From the failure of moral realism, we learn that a plausible moral theory is not grounded in the absolute demand of moral objectivity as it requires strong responsibility of justification that is hardly realizable.

"A middle way" is now opened to future inquires—it is neither absolute nor relative. Only if philosophers abandon the false dichotomy and devise a new moral theory, the progress to address the challenge of moral disagreements is as possible.



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