

Question 2: “It is plain that what different societies view as moral or immoral – as ethically right or wrong – has differed greatly at various times and various places. It is therefore futile to seek for a rational, objective basis for moral judgements”. John Doe.

John Doe’s conclusion is unjustified. From the claim that there has been extensive moral diversity across time, place, and societies, it does not directly follow that there are no objective criteria for adjudicating between competing ethical worldviews. The path from Descriptive Moral Relativism (*DMR*) to Metaethical Moral Relativism (*MMR*) is more complicated than Doe acknowledges.

*DMR* (Sentence 1) is the position that, as a matter of empirical fact, members of different cultures and societies adhere to different ethical norms and act according to diverse (and often mutually incompatible) moral standards and beliefs.

*MMR* (Sentence 2) is the position that the moral domain is such that objective, absolute, or universal judgements within it are impossible.

Doe’s conclusion is unjustified because *DMR* is insufficient to establish *MMR*: the mere existence of extensive moral diversity does not disprove the possibility that moral judgements can be objectively correct or incorrect about certain facts. That said, most arguments for *MMR* begin with, and are rooted in, *DMR*. For the common rationales for *MMR* would be undermined if *DMR* were refuted, and, if *DMR* were generally rejected, *MMR* would likely have few proponents. It is thus important to consider whether *DMR* is true.

Defenders usually take *DMR* to be well-established by empirically-based disciplines such as cultural anthropology, and many consider *DMR* to be obvious to anyone with even an elementary understanding of the history and cultures of the world. Moral practices that appear sharply at odds with moral outlooks common in Ireland, say, are not hard to come by – polygamy, suicide as a requirement of honour, and female circumcision, for example. At a more general level, at least two different approaches to morality can be found in the world: a virtue-centred morality that emphasises the good of the community, and a rights-centred morality that emphasises individual freedom (*Wong Moral*).

*DMR* is not uncontroversial, however. It is indeed obvious that there are some differences in people's ethical worldviews. But it is another matter to claim that ethical worldviews have differed greatly and that these differences outweigh whatever similarities there may be.

One approach to rejecting this claim focuses on the interpretation of the empirical evidence cited in support of *DMR*. Some critics highlight the obstacles facing any attempt to understand human cultures empirically. It can be argued that the supposed evidence is incomplete or inaccurate because the observers are biased; anthropologists have often had preconceptions rooted in disciplinary paradigms or political ideologies that have led them to misinterpret or misrepresent the data.

Critics also object to the assumption that societies and socio-cultural units are discrete, homogeneous, static entities – when, according to this objection, they are typically rather heterogeneous and complex internally, with many dissenting voices; what's more, they often interact, sometimes influence one another, and can change over time.

Other critics argue that the empirical evidence does not really show that there are significant moral differences, but is consistent with considerable moral agreement. Perceived disagreements may result from a general moral value (about which there is no disagreement) being implemented in different circumstances or in the same circumstances where there is factual disagreement about what these circumstances are. Either way, there is no real moral disagreement in these cases. For example, everyone might agree on the importance of promoting human welfare, but human welfare may be promoted differently in different, or differently understood, circumstances. Indeed there is evidence for considerable moral agreement across different and otherwise diverse societies. For example, the role-reversal test implied by the Golden Rule - "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" – has been prominent beyond Western traditions; a version is also endorsed in Confucius' *Analects*, Shāntiveda's *Way of the Bodhisattva*, and elsewhere.

Such *a posteriori* arguments contend that *DMR* is probably not true, or at least has not been established to be true. While these arguments have received increased support in recent years, they need to be subjected to the same critical scrutiny as those put forward in support of *DMR*. However, if they were correct, they would cast doubt on *DMR*.

If, in the final analysis, there were significant agreements as well as disagreements in people's moral values, it would complicate the empirical background of the metaethical debate. On the other hand, even if *DMR* were an accurate portrayal of existing moral diversity, it would not directly follow that *MMR* is true. Because metaethical relativists make the further claim that fundamental disagreements resulting from moral diversity cannot be rationally resolved. In this respect, *MMR* is opposed to both ethical realism – the position that there can be objectively true or false moral judgements – and moral cognitivism – the position that there are procedures to ascertain objectively what constitutes a good or right act.

Firstly to reiterate that perceived moral differences may not be as deep or irreconcilable as all that. It can be argued that, despite many cultural variations, there are some core ethical values that underpin all moral systems. A number of philosophers have also argued that there are some universal features of our common humanity that, although interpreted differently in different contexts and cultures, give us the beginnings of a denial of the relativist assumption of irreconcilable cultural diversity. Our mortality, embodiedness, experience of pleasure and pain, our cognitive capabilities, our ability to love and hate (and to engage in social rituals having to do with these feelings) point to the bedrock of all moral thought: our common humanity.

That said, my main concern is the rationale behind this metaethical claim. The scientific worldview, presupposed by Doe *et al.*, posits a sharp distinction between (objective) facts and (non-objective) values. Whereas science is supposed to deal with facts that are public, mind-independent, and (in principle) open to general agreement, values are notoriously hard to agree upon and do not seem to fit the category of “publically observable”.

This fact-value dichotomy is however untenable. On the factual side, the empirical hypotheses that are supposed to describe the world of natural facts bear the mark of epistemic values – such as rationality, simplicity, truthfulness – and, in that sense, are value-laden. On the evaluative side, many of our thick ethical concepts have an inescapable factual or descriptive component; to call someone “forthright”, say, is both to describe and evaluate them. In other words, the mind-independent world is invariably mediated through – and hence contaminated by – our conceptual contributions, and our conceptions of the world have descriptive and normative elements. A statement such as “making videotapes of child pornography is wrong” is no less true than a statement such as “the Rocky Mountains were formed when the Pacific Rim collided with the American Plate” – in fact, the truth of the

former is more unassailable than that of the latter. Both statements carry the imprint of our concepts and categories, and their truth is established by the method of “what is agreeable to reason” (Putnam 32) – a method that is in turn coloured by our encounters with the world.

While Doe’s relativism might seem plausible in the face of a dichotomy between facts and values, once we deny the legitimacy of this dichotomy – once we accept that “the natural” and “the normative” come in an inseparable mix – his position loses much of its appeal.

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