

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.' – Comment on this claim.

Is there a morally homogenous society? An identifiably, distinct culture that is united on a uniform set of moral values? Is there a morally consistent viewpoint displayed by the whole of a society, at one given time; that all other societies do not share? Did those 'societies' not also share philosophies that have existed across all societies at all times? That there are 'different societies holding different moral values' is a complex premise and not at all plain.

For the sake of argument, let's say it was a fact that English people in the 16th Century believed it morally justifiable to punish women they believed to be witches, and at some point in the future believed it to be morally wrong and this is an apt example of moral relativism. Then, I would be fairly confident in suggesting that not all people in England felt it to be a moral fact – I would suspect a large number of *women* might want to question it for a start. I might argue that the morality was instigated by a section of the ruling class who wanted to exert a religious authority over the people to further their own political and economic ends. The morality: a form of control rather than the morally position decided by that whole society.

I feel I know this fractured moral landscape is the case, since my own current time and culture holds vastly differing views on morality. It may seem that my neighbours and I have shared values, culturally designated and ideologically reinforced, but that is not my direct experience. While I am told that I should not kill others, my government (the power and authority of the land, the moral guardians of the common law) and its supporters allow the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, which then kills innocent people in Yemen – thousands directly by bombing, subsequently tens of thousands by famine.

Even if we were able to say that different societies held different moral standards at different times and so morality is relative, I could just as well argue that those moral standards could be wrong when held against a higher, objective absolute standard from wherever it may originate – let us say in the DNA of humans who are on a constantly progressive journey to higher moral standards. The fact that burning witches was decided to be immoral at some point suggests people were seeking a better morality. That morality can change is a strong argument for objectivity: why would it need to change, if there weren't a better morality to be attained?

If we equate morality with truth then there is a strong case to suggest that we can hold different truths: that we can have different 'moralities'. It might be more pertinent to argue that societies might not hold uniform moral values, but that relativity resides with the individual. It would possibly be a stronger argument to say that morality is

subjective and that individuals have different moral standards that can change also; my truth is different to your truth based on my individual experience. Still, to say that moral values are subjective, and so there is no such thing as objective moral truth, is almost like saying: because people like different kinds of cake; there is no such thing as cake.

Morality exists because everyone seeks a moral framework. Nihilists, if they exist (and I've never met one) might suggest moral values are meaningless, but that is a position based on morality existing. Objectively, moral frameworks exist across time and cultures. Moral frameworks are innate in the same way as language. Having worked with young children for a large part of my life I was always struck by their capacity for seeking fairness once they were engaged negotiators in a community of equals.

There is some appeal in doubting morality to be held by one group in some time and place, since it judges another group, who might exhibit a different moral code. So in an attempt to avoid the dangers of ethnocentrism, we can strive to be tolerant of each other, and other cultures. But is there a moral action that is different from mine that I cannot judge to be better or worse? I believe I can rationally analyse differing morals and decide which course of action may be the best to take. Even if that course of action is the lesser of two evils, it is still a moral course. In fact it is the most rational of courses. And who wants to be tolerated anyway? Does that not suggest you are really judging someone's lifestyle to be wrong in your terms, but feel it necessary to, 'put up with them'. Should we be tolerant of fascists who base their political philosophy on hatred and fear of the other?

Then why do we often break moral rules we know we should abide by? I may act immorally for a number of rational reasons but that does not deny that morality isn't the guiding factor, or that it is the fulcrum upon which the action is based, even if the rational argument is to act immorally. Indeed it is almost impossible to act morally in a world that is controlled by the centrally immoral position that we should all act selfishly. I am constantly amazed that people continue to act as morally as they do. The most corrupt and evil dictators know that they have to formulate some kind of morality. The most wicked and heinous acts will have been justified somehow in the minds of the perpetrators. If the rationale is that morality does not exist so you can do what you want, some justification for what you might do is required.

Even if I accept it can be very problematic to work through morality, I am compelled to do so, alongside my fellow humans; what might appear futile at times – a quest for truth – is all I really have. In recognising the appeal of a moral relativist position, I seem to deny it at every turn. For me, it is less the negative case of accepting moral relativism: rather, the positive attempt to be relatively moral.