Major Ethical Systems: Ethical Relativism

*Introduction*

There are two main types of ethical relativism:

1.      Cultural Relativism (or Conventionalism)

2.      Moral Subjectivism

In short, cultural relativism holds that right and wrong are entirely relative to one's culture or community, whereas moral subjectivism maintains that right and wrong are relative to one's personal preference. In other words, there are no "principles" or "oughts" or "the good" that applies to everyone and for all times. Ethical objectivism is rejected, which holds that "although cultures may differ in their moral principles, some moral principles have universal validity" (Audi, 1999, p. 790).

Ethical relativism had its beginning in the ancient world, particularly with the Sophists during the 5th century B.C. Perhaps the most famous Sophist is Protagoras (c. 490-420 B.C.), whose famous statement that "man is the measure of all things" continues to be studied and interpreted today. Although there is ongoing debate as to the meaning of his claim, and many other ethical claims made by Protagoras and other Sophists, there is general consensus that Sophists reject ethical objectivism and universal truth, as well as any external source for ethics: for instance, God or the gods. Rather, they claim human beings, individually and/or socially, are their own best authorities for what is ethically true, right, and good. Some Sophists go so far as to claim that immorality, understood as opposed to conventional laws or justice, is preferable and that one ought to seek to follow "nature" rather than "law" in seeking to gain strength and power over others by the means necessary, thus fulfilling natural human desire.

Sophists were celebrities of their time; they were great orators and sophisticated teachers who gained considerable wealth and status as they sought to persuade and gain control over others. It seems that seeking and knowing the truth was less central to their concerns than vanquishing opponents, using cunning to their own advantage, and getting away with subversive actions in promoting self-interest and personal power.

Similar in some ways to the ancient Sophists, particularly in regards to ethical relativism, many present-day thinkers seek to persuade others to follow their moral viewpoints. As shown in Topic 2, Worldview and Ethics, what one understands reality to be powerfully shapes one's approach to ethics. Whatever view of God, creation, sin, redemption, meaning and purpose, it will dramatically inform a person's ethical thinking and moral practice. Metaphysical or practical atheists and agnostics necessarily tend toward anthropologically-centered and/or nature-centered ethics. Some advocate conventional morality that is local or culture-based; others favoring individual morality that is subjectively-centered. A growing number of ethical naturalism proponents encourage ethical theories based exclusively on scientific study of the purely natural world, which is founded on an ideology of scientism. And other ideologies abound through which scholars and non-scholars alike hope to reinforce their views and ways of life often by means of adopting supportive moral positions.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is an ethical theory that can be described as "the view that moral beliefs and practices vary with and depend on the human needs and social conditions of particular cultures, so that no moral beliefs can be universally true" (Holmes, 2007, p. 19). It is a common way of approaching ethics in Western society and essentially affirms that objective moral standards do not exist. Rather each culture creates its own standards of right and wrong to suit its purposes. The "right" thing to do for any individual is the accepted moral practice within their society. However, it should be pointed out that the "is" or fact of the "the accepted moral practice" cannot be used to justify the "ought" of it. For example, Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany certainly exhibited radically divergent moral values from virtually all other cultures, but nearly all would agree that many of their moral values were wrong and "ought not" to have been believed or practiced, such as those thoughts and behaviors involving atrocities committed against Jews, Gypsies, and resistance groups and individuals.

Cultural relativism holds that one should refrain from passing moral judgments on beliefs and practices characteristic of cultures other than one's own, based on a belief that there are no universal moral values shared by every human society. Interestingly, these strong claims actually amount to claims of objective truth or moral absolutes. In the first instance, claiming there are no universal values entails making an objective truth claim. In the second case, saying one ought never to evaluate alternative cultural beliefs and practices involves an appeal to an alleged moral absolute. These strong claims cultural relativists expect everyone to embrace, which makes such claims self-referentially incoherent. Claiming no universal moral norms exist while appealing to a principle as a functional universal norm is clearly self-referentially incoherent.

Nevertheless, cultural relativism has the strength of being aware of ethnocentricity. For example, American values are not necessarily superior to other cultures simply based on the perception of the United States' economic or technological progress. Similarly, this theory reminds the believer that Christianity is "trans-cultural." Western or American values are not necessarily the same as Christian values.

However, cultural relativism has serious problems as well. The believer should ask if cultural relativism is coherent with a Christian worldview. This theory seems to put "culture" in the place of God. Also, cultural relativism might not distinguish between moral practices and moral principles. Some moral disagreements between cultures may actually be the result of a shared moral principle. Lying in order to "save face" in an Asian culture may actually be a reflection of a moral value to honor others that is shared by Western culture. Finally, one person may be a member of numerous subcultures within a society, each with their own moral standards, such as a family, a peer group, a university, and a church. In this situation, which subculture's values should the cultural relativist adhere to? (Wilkens, 2011).

Moral Subjectivism

Moral Subjectivism is an ethical theory whose "motto" might be termed "morality lies in the eye of the beholder" (Audi, 1999, p. 790). While this idea often is thought to be relatively new or a product of the current or previous century, moral subjectivism actual is found in ancient times, even among the covenant people of God during a rebellious period in their history, "And everyone did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25 NIV). This purely individualistic view of morality refuses to follow any external authority for ethical truth, rightness, or goodness. For instance, even to say that someone is "a good person" is simply a feeling or impulse that is projected by the moral subjectivist about the person and has no basis in moral objectivity or external ethical standards; thus, for moral subjectivism, ethics is not a source for objective truth or reality.

Ethical Relativism and the Christian Worldview

That ethical relativism is incompatible with the Christian worldview is evident for many reasons, including Christian faith commitments regarding God's existence, nature and moral character, relationship with humanity and all creation, and call to human beings and cultures to ethical thinking and moral wisdom as seen throughout the scriptures. While it can affirmed with ethical relativists that there are important differences in cultural moral practices, it cannot be affirmed that all human beliefs and behaviors are merely matters of individual choice that ought never to be judged as morally right or wrong. Rather, human beliefs and practices can and must be evaluated, including one's own, through a worldview lens that provides clear ethical insight, wisdom, and instruction for the good of humankind and all creation.