Relativism and Subjectivism
The Denial of Objective Ethical Standards
Starting with a counter argument

1. The universe operates according to laws
2. The universe can be investigated through the use of both reason and experience
3. This investigation can reveal consistent patterns
4. These patterns reveal the laws upon which the universe operates

Therefore: Man can understand the laws by which the physical universe operates, and,
Therefore: Man can use the knowledge of these laws to predict physical phenomena

The goal of ethics is to discover, through rational investigation, ethical principles which can be applied in all cases and situations. The premise or assumption made by those who undertake this investigation is that there are principles, which, when applied, are capable of resolving ethical disputes objectively, regardless of situation. In a sense, the argument those who believe in objective ethical principles make is identical to the argument that forms the basis of scientific inquiry.
1. Right and wrong are objective concepts

2. These concepts can be investigated by man through reason and experience

3. This investigation can reveal consistent patterns

4. These patterns reveal the ethical principles upon which right and wrong are based

Therefore: Mankind can understand the basis for judging actions right or wrong, and,

Therefore: Ethical disputes (disputes over right and wrong) can be objectively (and conclusively) resolved.

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Cultural Relativism

The theory that ideas of right and wrong are not objective nor determined by individuals, but rather determined by the culture in which one lives.

What examples does Schick provide to illustrate cultural relativism? (Wife bring/India, Polygamy/Syria, FGM/Sudan)
Can you think of practices that are seen as acceptable in the US that might be seen as wrong elsewhere?
Claims of cultural relativism from Rachels

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal code better than another.
3. The moral code of our society has no special status; it is merely one among many.
4. There is no "universal truth" in ethics (in anthropology, this idea is captured by the question "What is normal?" the implied answer of which is "there is no normal.")
5. The moral code of a society determines what is right or wrong for that society
6. It is arrogance (ethnocentrism) to claim to judge the practices of other cultures.

Therefore: There are no universal (objective) moral standards

Problems:
Premise three - The fact of disagreement does not mean no one is right.
Premise two - (The Asch argument) Moral standards may be the same, but the view of reality itself may be different (Consider abortion)
Premise three - Moral progress (abolition of slavery, Human rights, Equality of women) is only possible if measured against some standard. That standard is objective. We have made moral progress, therefore objective standards exist.
Premise One - Self evident propositions that all agree to (unnecessary suffering is wrong)
The cultural differences (sometimes called the anthropological) argument from Rachels

1. x culture believes y action is wrong, whereas z culture believes y action is right

2. If y were objectively wrong, all cultures would consider y wrong

Therefore, y is neither objectively objectively right or objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture

Therefore: There are no universal (objective) moral standards

Problems:

**Premise One** - (The Asch argument) Moral standards may be the same, but the view of reality itself may be different (Consider abortion)

**Premise one** - There is more agreement on values than CR allows - As Rachels points out - differences in custom/practice do not necessarily mean differences in values (caring for children, truth telling, unnecessary suffering)

**Premise two** - The fact of disagreement does not mean no one is right or that all are possible wrong

**Conclusion** - Moral progress (abolition of slavery, Human rights, Equality of women) is only possible if measured against some standard. That standard is objective. We have made moral progress, therefore objective standards exist.
Arguments on behalf of cultural relativism

• CR takes into account the unique historical and material circumstances of cultures (Rachels p. 20)

• CR promotes open mindedness and tolerance and rejects ethnocentrism (Rachels 22)

• CR acts as a check on the natural belief that our preferences are absolutely grounded in reason or nature (Rachels 23)
Arguments Rejecting Cultural relativism

• Premise 2 of the cultural differences argument is flawed

• Right and wrong become difficult to judge - everything is simply different
Cultural Relativism Debate

• Sit with your assigned group (even/odd)

• The even side will argue that there are objective moral standards that apply universally. The odd side will argue that there are not universal moral standards and that all morals are determined at the level of culture.

• You will be given 15 minutes to prepare.

• The debate will be conducted free form, but people must not talk over one another. Arguments, questions and answers should be raised throughout the debate. The only rule is sides must alternate (even/odd)

• Scoring. Each side gets one point for each of the following: All on the side speak. Each quote used from a document. Each real world example used to support your case.

The side that has the lowest standard deviation in terms of the number of times each person speaks will receive a 2 points. Each delay of more than five seconds counts as a negative point
Arguments Rejecting Cultural relativism
Problems with cultural differences argument

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Further problems with Cultural relativism

- What about cultural reformers?
- Is criticizing one’s society wrong?
- What constitutes a culture?
- Moral paralysis - Taylor chapter 2
Subjectivism

Definition

Varieties of subjectivism

Normative

Meta-ethical

Subjectivism maintains that no ethical proposition is objectively true for all people.

Objectively true = A proposition that is true independently of anyone thinking that it is

In ToK terms, subjectivism maintains either that there is no such thing as an ethical big T truth, or, that such knowledge is impossible for humans to attain.

Normative subjectivism - An act is ethically right, if and only if, the person judging the act approves of it (Shafer-Landau 555). Right and wrong are determined at the level of the individual.

Meta-ethical subjectivism - Normative ethical theories cannot be true (in a way this is Sartre's position - no external ethical truth)

Our focus will be on normative subjectivism
Arguments for Normative Subjectivism (and their weaknesses)
The argument from atheism (Sartre's subjectivism)

1. Either God exists or ethical truths are not objective (and are determined by the individual)

2. God does not exist

Therefore: Ethical truths not objective (and are determined by the individual)

The basis of this argument - Laws require law givers (no lawgivers = no laws)

**Objections**

1. In ToK we debate whether math is invented or discovered. If math is discovered, then mathematical truths exist independently of human inquiry. The same argument could be made for ethics (A: S-L 558 column 2)

2. God either has reasons for his commands or they are arbitrary. If God's commands are arbitrary, then they are not the basis for a rationale ethical system, rather they are justified by power (might makes right). If God has reasons, then it is these reasons that justify the commandments not God. If these reasons are the basis of right and wrong, then these ethical principles can exist independently of God. Thus the objectivity of of ethics does not depend on God's commandments, and could exist without him (thus contradicting 1 above) (B: S-L 558 column 2)

3. The conclusion does not have to follow the premises. Meta-ethical subjectivism or Cultural relativism could also be true
What is the argument implicit in the cartoon?

Ethnocentrism and other forms of cultural superiority have as their starting point a belief in the objectivity of ethics (there is a right way and a wrong way of doing things). By dismissing objectivity we encourage tolerance and diversity.
The argument from tolerance

1. If normative subjectivism is true, then no one ethical viewpoint is inherently more plausible than any other.

2. If no one ethical viewpoint is more plausible than any others, we must adopt an attitude of tolerance towards ethical perspectives that are not our own.

Therefore: Normative subjectivism leads to a more tolerant, and thus peaceful society.

Problems
1. Should we tolerate abhorrent views?
2. Ethical objectivism does not have to lead to ethnocentrism. In fact some would argue ethnocentrism is an outgrowth of cultural relativism (itself a form of subjectivism).
3. This argument maintains tolerance is good and intolerance is wrong, but to say intolerance is wrong (or that tolerance is good) is to elevate tolerance to the level of an objective standard - a contradiction of the basis of subjectivism. (This is what Taylor means when he says soft relativism self destructs)
The argument from democracy

1. If everyone has the right to have moral opinions, then everyone's moral opinions are equally plausible.

2. Everyone does have the equal right to have their own moral opinions

Therefore: Everyone's moral opinions are equally plausible

Problems
1. Premise 1 is false. The right to an opinion does not mean that opinion is true. I have the right to assert the President Obama is a Muslim, but that does not mean such an assertion is plausible. The right to an opinion and the opinion's plausibility are independent of each other.
2. One pitfall of our democracy is that democratic values seem to endorse this kind of subjectivism. Is subjectivity unavoidable in a democracy?
The argument from disagreement

1. If there is persistent disagreement among informed, good-willed, open-minded people about some subject matter, in some subject matter, then that subject lacks objective truth.

2. There is persistent disagreement about ethical issues among informed, goodwill, open-minded people.

Therefore: There are not objective ethical truths

Problems
1. Premise one often results from misinformation. With the correct data, many disagreements would dissolve.
2. Many fields have significant disagreement (math, science etc.) No one (except maybe a post modernist) is going to argue that for this reason, these field's lack objectivity.
Shafer-Landau argues that any viable ethical theory must pass two tests

1. Does the theory advance a positive argument that survives scrutiny (to which I would clarify: Does the theory provide a sound basis for solving ethical conflicts)?

2. Are the implications of this theory one we can live with?

Does Subjectivism pass these tests?
1. Since subjectivism is a theory of moral equivalence (all opinions are equal) it fails as a means of resolving conflict.
2. Subjectivism suggests that the individual is morally infallible (again, violating 1 and suggesting implications (Hitler) that violate 2)
3. Subjectivism makes rational argument about ethical positions impossible, (violating 1 and 2) thus
4. Subjectivism means our moral views are arbitrary (Violating 1)