

It is often assumed that people are moral absolutists. Although Paul Boghossian supports this claim by seemingly defeating every reasonable type of relativism, Sarkissian et al. provide reason to think that people are generally moral relativists. I will argue that people really do believe in moral relativism, but that we think that all humans should agree to one universal moral code by which any member of our society should abide. I will develop and examine this argument in more detail, and argue that my theory not only explains the data from Sarkissian et al. but that it also overcomes one of Boghossian's arguments against relativism.

It may seem contradictory to argue that we are relativists but at the same time we want to have a universal moral code, so I should clarify. When I say people are relativists, I mean that they don't think that there actually is an objectively true moral code that exists outside the scope of human existence. Instead, people think that humans have had a part in creating the moral code that we abide by. That is, when I say that people believe everyone should abide by a universal moral code, I am not saying that such a moral code is objectively true or right. Instead, humans try to create the optimal moral code for our society, where "optimal" means some combination of practical, beneficial, and reasonable, among other criteria. For example, killing people may be against our moral code because it makes our society more unstable and causes more overall harm than benefit to the members of society. Another example is donating money to charity: It is considered morally good because it usually has a net effect of benefitting people, but it is not morally required because doing so might be less reasonable and even harmful for people who have very little of their own money to begin with. I think my way of explaining how we choose the optimal moral code is fairly intuitive and it seems that most people use this type of criteria (even if sub-consciously) when trying to decide whether they believe something is right or wrong. So my claim is that people strive to find this optimal moral code, and that people generally

think that all humans on earth (even those from varying cultures) should follow this optimal moral code. One important claim I make is that when someone talks about morality, it is implicit that she is referring to this optimal morality that applies to everyone in our society, unless she states otherwise. Overall, I believe that this theory helps explain people's general intuitions much better than objectivism or than the standard version of relativism.

Now it may still seem that I've in fact argued for a kind of moral objectivism, since I've said that people believe everyone should follow the same moral code and that there is reason to disagree over what is right and wrong. I must emphasize that although people may think that all people in our global society of humans should follow the same moral rules, that doesn't mean that people think that those rules are a pre-existing fact about the world. To further show that my view really is a type of relativism, we can compare it to the relativism of simultaneity. It is known that two events cannot be objectively simultaneous, but only simultaneous relative to some inertial reference frame. However, for many situations, there can be an optimal inertial reference frame, where in this case "optimal" could mean most practical, easiest to understand, or some other criteria we desire it to have. For example, there can be an optimal inertial reference frame to use when solving a specific problem, for instance the one that makes the calculations easiest. Perhaps a more relevant example is considering passengers on a plane. When one passenger is making conversation with another, and she claims that she just saw two events occur simultaneously, it is optimal to consider the inertial reference frame of the plane they are in. Unless she states otherwise, the other passengers will all intuitively assume that she is speaking relative to their current inertial reference frame. This is similar to my version of moral relativism, where the passengers on the plane are replaced with all members of our society and the plane's inertial reference frame is replaced with the optimal moral code for all of humanity. Thus, I conclude that my theory is in

fact a type of relativism, and can be appropriately compared with relativism about simultaneity.

To provide some evidence that what people actually think about morality matches what I claim they think, let's consider the data found by Sarkissian et al. In their experiment, participants were given scenarios in which two individuals had different moral judgments about a certain scenario (i.e. one says an act is morally permissible and the other says it is not). In each case, one of the disagreeing parties was a classmate, and the other varied: it was either another classmate ("same-culture"), a person from a radically different society ("other-culture"), or an alien ("extraterrestrial"). The participants were then asked whether or not they agreed with the statement "Since [X] and [Y] have different judgments about this case, at least one of them must be wrong."<sup>1</sup> The data they collected shows that the degree to which participants agreed to the statement "at least one must be wrong" decreased from the same-culture case to the other-culture case, and decreased again from other-culture to extraterrestrial. This suggests that despite popular belief, people don't actually believe in moral objectivism. This data supports my claim that people's intuitions are relativistic but that people still want an optimal moral code for all of humanity. In the first case, it is clear that the two classmates are both a part of our overall society, and it follows that they should both be able to understand the optimal moral code and thus we think they should abide by it. People believe that there can be genuine disagreement between the classmates because they are truly disagreeing about what should be included in the optimal moral code. This is different from the other-culture scenario, because people don't necessarily believe that someone from an isolated culture would have the same ideas about morals as us. Since this other culture hasn't interacted with our society at all, there is not necessarily a compelling reason to think that the moral

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1. Sarkissian et al. "Folk Moral Relativism," page 487.

code that is optimal for our society is the same moral code that is optimal for the other society. I believe that this explains why people intuitively think that their classmate and the member of the other culture can both be correct when they have opposite judgments. This is even more evident in the extraterrestrial case: the aliens certainly haven't interacted with human society before, and there is even more reason to believe that their optimal moral system could differ from ours. Since they are totally different beings with different priorities and a different way of interacting, they could feasibly have a different way of optimizing whatever criteria is important to them. The reason that people are even more relativist in the extraterrestrial case than in the other-culture case is not obvious, but I think it can be explained as follows: It is intuitively reasonable that a different human society would look for the same values in an optimal moral code as we would, whereas it would be a much bigger stretch to think that a totally different species from another planet would do the same. A human from the other culture is still a human after all, and we know he is a rational being, just like us. I think that this can explain why people have the intuition that someone from another culture might still be expected to abide by our optimal set of moral values. Overall, I have explained how Sarkissian et al's data supports my theory about people's moral beliefs.

My claim about folk moral intuitions not only explains the data from Sarkissian et al., but it also helps refute one of Boghossian's arguments against relativism. Boghossian discusses three types of relativism: thoroughgoing relativism, alethic relativism, and absolutist relativism. The folk relativism that I have proposed is a type of thoroughgoing relativism (specifically, contextualism), because I say that when people make moral claims, they are really making claims about a certain moral system. Thus I will only consider Boghossian's objection to contextualism. Boghossian argues that if someone claims

(1) Killing is wrong

and someone else claims

(2) Killing is not wrong

then they are intuitively disagreeing. However, a contextualist may claim that when someone claims

(1), they are really claiming

(3) Killing is not wrong based on my moral code M

and that someone claiming (2) is claiming

(4) Killing is not wrong based on my moral code M\*

Boghossian concludes that since both (3) and (4) can be true, it doesn't make sense for there to be any disagreement between the speakers, and so contextualism must be wrong since there is disagreement.<sup>2</sup>

However, on my view, the people are not actually disagreeing about whether or not a statement is true relative to M or to M\*, but that the real disagreement lies in whether or not it should be true relative to the optimal moral code for humanity. They argue over whether the specific feature of M or that of M\* is better suited to optimize our moral code. It is intuitive that there can be genuine disagreement about which moral beliefs are the most beneficial, practical, or any property we want to optimize. Thus it is intuitive that there can be genuine disagreement between the speakers of (1) and (2), even if they are relativists. They can agree that moral values are not objective, yet still argue which moral values are most optimal for society. Thus my theory about folk morality defeats Boghossian's argument.

What happens when somebody joins our society? Under my theory, newborn children of members of society are automatically expected to comply with our moral code, and this is pretty clear because most people would intuitively agree that a child gets her morals from her family and

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2. Boghossian, Paul. "Three Kinds of Relativism"

community. However, the more interesting case to be considered is when someone who already follows a different moral code integrates into our society. Since it is less clear whether humans of a different culture are actually a part of the greater global society or not, I will consider only the extraterrestrial case in this essay. If a distant planet (call it Grogor) sent a ship of aliens (call them Grogos) to Earth, people wouldn't expect that the Grogos would already have the same moral code as us. Suppose they don't. If the Grog stepped off his ship and somehow communicated that he thought killing was not wrong, then my theory says that most people wouldn't say the alien has an objectively incorrect moral view, and this is supported by the data collected by Sarkissian et al. However, suppose that the Grogos decide to stay on Earth and integrate into our society (supposing that there are no physical constraints that prevent this and that they can learn to communicate with us effectively). I expect the "transition period" may be more uncertain, so let's suppose that the Grogos have settled in a bit: they have learned the necessary practical details about living on earth and interacting with humans. At this point, my theory says that we would then expect the Grogos to comply with our moral code, and that if one expressed "killing is not wrong" we would now say that he does have the wrong moral view! At first, my argument may seem like a double standard or a contradiction; however, it makes sense in light of what I claim our moral theory is based on. I claimed that our optimal moral code incorporates values like being overall beneficial and producing happiness, among other criteria. If a Grog living on his home planet thought that killing was not wrong, it would not change the balance of benefits, happiness, or any other quality of human life, so we would have no reason to care what the alien does on Grogor, and we would not say that his moral judgment is wrong. However, when the Grog makes the decision to become part of our society, that commitment comes with the responsibility of abiding by our moral code. If a Grog were to kill a person on Earth, it would have a very negative effect on

many people in society, so it would not be considered morally wrong. My conclusion is that someone can only make moral judgments about a member of his or her own society. This distinction follows from my theory that moral codes arise from a combination of values important to that specific society, and it is evidenced by the data from Sarkissian et al.

In conclusion, I have provided reason to believe the theory that people are moral relativists, but that we still expect all people on Earth should have a universal moral code, one based on some combination of practicality, happiness-creating, and other criteria. I have examined features this theory and I have shown that this theory is supported by Sarkissian et al's data, and that it can overcome one of Boghossian's objections to moral relativism.

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