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Cultural Relativism and Tolerance

John Tilley

Cultural relativists often speak as if their thesis entails, or somehow guarantees, tolerance.¹ Perhaps their idea is that a fully consistent thinker who embraces cultural relativism is sure to be tolerant of the behavior he finds in other cultures. Many people accept this idea, but many others reject it, including most moral philosophers. Disappointingly, the reasoning of those who accept it is rarely examined, and the stock argument by which philosophers reject it is unsound. In this essay I will examine the reasoning behind the view that cultural relativism entails tolerance, and show that the standard objection to that view fails. This does not mean that I think relativism ensures tolerance. Indeed, I will show that the reasoning behind that view is fallacious; it does not forge a connection between tolerance and cultural relativism. After showing this I will address two possible replies from the opposing camp.

I

By “cultural relativism” (hereafter “relativism”) I mean the following thesis:

What’s morally right (wrong, obligatory, etc.) for one culture is not likely to be right for the next culture. This is because the truth of any judgment that ascribes moral rightness or wrongness to an action is somehow dependent on, or “relative to,” the cultural norms of the agent’s society, and cultural norms vary from one society to another.

Does this thesis entail tolerance? Many people think so, on the following grounds. Relativism implies that we cannot impose our morality on the people of other cultures, which in turn implies that we must refrain from

¹ Two examples are Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 278; and Melville Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York: Knopf, 1948), 76, 78.

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doing so. But to refrain from doing so is to be tolerant. Thus, if we accept relativism we are logically committed to a policy of tolerance.

This argument is tempting but unsound—tempting because it contains some truth if charitably read; unsound because even if we read it charitably, it fails to support its conclusion. I will explain all this shortly, but first I will consider the standard response from moral philosophers, meaning the standard objection to the view that relativism ensures tolerance.² It runs as follows. Relativism maintains, roughly, that morality is relative to cultural norms. If relativism is true, an act is morally right if and only if it is customary in the agent's society. So if being intolerant is customary in a society, the people of that society are morally right to be intolerant. Thus, far from entailing tolerance, relativism implies that for some people, intolerance might be morally right, perhaps even obligatory. This is because relativism makes moral rightness, obligatoriness, etc., entirely a function of cultural norms.

The argument fails owing to its first premise, which interprets relativism to imply that

(A) an act is morally right if and only if it is customary in the agent's society.

This reading is uncharitable. First of all, there are other natural readings of the claim that morality is relative to cultural norms. For instance, we can read it to mean that

(B) an act is morally right **only if** it is customary in the agent's society.

² See F. Feldman, *Introductory Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 171; R. L. Holmes, *Basic Moral Philosophy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993), 37; and P. Schmidt, "Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism," *Journal of Philosophy* 52 (1955), 786f.

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To see that (B) is an acceptable reading, consider the claim that bachelorhood (the property of being a bachelor) is relative to one's marital status. There is no need to read this as the ridiculous claim that a person is a bachelor **if and only if** the person is unmarried. Instead, we can read it to mean that a person is a bachelor **only if** he is unmarried. Likewise, statement (B) is a natural reading of the thesis that morality is relative to cultural norms.

Secondly, just as the first of the two statements about bachelorhood is less plausible than the second, (A) is less plausible than (B). To read relativism as asserting (A) is to expose it to objections that have no force against (B). One such objection is that if relativism is true, we can determine what's right within a society simply by discovering what's habitual in that society (e.g., by taking a poll).³ Since the consequent of this statement is preposterous, we must reject relativism.

This objection threatens (A), but not (B). (B) states merely a **necessary** condition, not a necessary and **sufficient** condition, for moral rightness. Perhaps (B) is vulnerable to criticism, but it cannot be dismissed as easily as (A).

In sum, (B) is a natural reading of the claim that morality is relative to cultural norms; also, (B) is more plausible than (A). So fairness requires that we favor (B) over (A) when interpreting the claim that "what's right for a person is relative to what's customary in her society." Once we do this, the view that relativism entails tolerance is not open to the philosopher's standard objection.

³ See A. G. Oldenquist, *Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 51.

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Some might disagree with all this, and reply as follows. Relativists often state their view in a way that approximates (A) rather than (B).⁴ Since we cannot be faulted for taking an author at his word, we have every right to interpret relativists as holding (A) or something like it. Any objection that refutes (A) is fair to use against relativism.

This reply falsely assumes that we should always take an author at his word. The principle of charity sometimes requires that we ignore the specific words of an author and focus on the more plausible ideas lying behind them. To take a familiar example, utilitarians sometimes speak as if their thesis were the doctrine of “the greatest good of the greatest number.” Philosophers agree that this is a poor formulation of utilitarianism, for it exposes that thesis to a forceful criticism.⁵ But they also agree that utilitarianism avoids the criticism if better formulated, and that fairness demands that we favor one of these better formulations when interpreting utilitarians. Likewise, fairness requires that we favor (B) over (A) when interpreting relativism.

II

Let us return to the argument designed to derive tolerance from relativism. According to that argument, relativism implies that we cannot impose our morality on the people of other cultures, which in turn implies that we must refrain from doing so. But to refrain from doing so is to be tolerant. Thus, relativism requires us to be tolerant of the people of other cultures.

⁴ An example is M. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Vintage Press, 1973), 101.

⁵ For an example of this poor formulation, see the preface to J. Bentham's *A Fragment on Government* (many editions). For the criticism to which it is open, see Feldman, *Introductory Ethics*, 27f. In a nutshell, the criticism is that if utilitarianism is stated in the above way, it requires us to maximize two **independent** variables: utility and total number of people benefited.

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Although safe from the philosopher's usual criticism, this argument is fallacious. The problem is that the phrase "impose our morality" is ambiguous. The statement, "We can't impose our morality on the people of other cultures" has at least three possible meanings:

- (1) When speaking about another culture we cannot say, "Those people are obligated to do **x**" (where **x** is something the people of **our** culture are obligated to do), and be confident of saying something **true**.
- (2) We cannot force the people of another culture to comply with a moral demand simply because it is a demand to which the people of **our** culture are subject.
- (3) We cannot make the people of another culture the **victims** of our morality.

How do we make a person the "victim" of our morality? We do so whenever we harm an innocent person as a result of our moral views. We can clarify this by considering our treatment of animals, for we often make animals the victims of our morality. We not only harm them, but do so owing to moral beliefs that we consciously hold. To take an obvious example, most people think that killing animals for food is morally permissible. As a result, many animals are killed.

People often make other **people** the victims of their morality. The Crimean Tatars of the seventeenth century thought it was morally permissible

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to enslave Russians and Cossacks; so they made annual raids on these people and sold them as slaves throughout the Ottoman empire.⁶ No doubt some of the Tatars thought they were morally **required** to go on these raids—to “do their share of the work,” so to speak. Thus, the Tatars did not simply enslave, and in that way harm, the Russians and Cossacks they raided; they did so **owing** to their moral beliefs. The Russians and Cossacks were not simply victims of the Tatars, but victims of the Tatars’ **morality**.

We now have three readings of “impose,” which we can distinguish by using the terms “impose₁,” “impose₂,” and “impose₃.” For instance, to say that we cannot impose₃ our morality on others is to say that we cannot make others the victims of our morality.

Now let’s return to the argument concerning tolerance, and consider it step by step:

(C) If relativism is true, we can’t impose our morality on the people of other cultures.

(D) Thus, we must refrain from imposing our morality on the people of other cultures.

(E) To refrain from imposing our morality on others is to be tolerant of others.

(F) Therefore, relativism requires us to be tolerant of the people of other cultures.

⁶ For a brief account of this practice, and a hint as to why it was thought morally permissible by the Tatars, see O. Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 106–9.

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To make (C) true, we must employ only the **first** interpretation of “impose.” That is, we must read “impose” to mean “impose₁.” Relativism says that moral **truth** varies with culture; hence although it implies that we cannot impose₁ our morality on other cultures, it does **not** imply that we cannot impose₂ or impose₃ our morality on other cultures. Just think about it with reference to the Tatars. They might accept relativism, and as a result grant that because of cultural differences between Tatars and Russians, the statement “**We** are obligated to conduct raids and enslave people” is true, yet the statement “**Russians** are obligated to conduct raids and enslave people” is false. But this is merely to grant a point about the **truth conditions** of moral judgments; it does not compel the Tatars, either logically or morally, to refrain from their raids. In other words, it’s consistent for the Tatars to accept relativism and hence agree that they cannot impose₁ their morality on Russians, while insisting that they **can** impose₃ their morality on Russians.

So to make premise (C) true we must read “impose” to mean “impose₁.” We must interpret (D) in a similar way, for it is meant as a corollary of (C).

When considering (E), however, we should read “imposing” to mean, not “imposing₁,” but “imposing₂ and imposing₃.” This is because **tolerance** has nothing to do with failing or succeeding to state moral truths. It involves refraining from various **actions**—actions that interfere with the lives of other people. Even if we do not impose₁ our morality on others we can easily be intolerant of them by, say, imposing₃ our morality on them. Hence to maintain, plausibly, that by not imposing our morality on others we are being tolerant, we should use “imposing” to mean “imposing₂ and imposing₃.”

So the argument concerning tolerance becomes this:

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(C') If relativism is true, we can't impose₁ our morality on the people of other cultures.

(D') Thus, we must refrain from imposing₁ our morality on the people of other cultures.

(E') To refrain from imposing₂ and imposing₃ our morality on others is to be tolerant of others.

(F) Therefore, relativism requires us to be tolerant of the people of other cultures.

This argument is invalid. (In fact, even the first step of the argument—the step from (C') to (D')—is invalid, but I'll let that pass.) (C') and (D') have to do with imposing₁ our morality on others, but (E') has to do with imposing₂ and imposing₃ our morality on others. The result is an argument of the following form, which is plainly fallacious: If relativism is true, we cannot **X**, which means we must refrain from **X**. To refrain from **Y** and **Z** is to be tolerant. Therefore, relativism requires us to be tolerant.

The upshot is that we have been furnished no reason to think that relativism ensures tolerance. Relativism implies that various moral judgments cannot truthfully be made about other cultures, but this is a far cry from entailing a policy of tolerance. This often goes unnoticed owing to an ambiguity in the phrase, "impose our morality on others."

III

I will consider two possible replies to the preceding claims. The first is that although relativism does not ensure tolerance, it remains preferable to non-relativism because unlike the latter, it does not ensure **intolerance**. In short,

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relativism remains attractive because its opposite, non-relativism, entails a policy of intolerance toward other cultures.

This reply is mistaken. Non-relativism is merely the rejection of moral relativism, a family of theories that includes cultural relativism. It is not the rejection of tolerance. In fact, many non-relativists view the following as a transcultural truth: “It’s morally right to tolerate others.”

Some relativists will be skeptical of this, and will argue as follows:

(G) To be a non-relativist is to think that some actions are wrong in a non-relative way; their wrongness is not a function of cultural norms. Call those actions **x**, **y** and **z**.

(H) But if we believe that **x**, **y** and **z** are wrong in this way, we are committed to the further belief that we must interfere with any culture that practices **x**, **y** and **z**.

(I) But to interfere in this way is to be intolerant.

(J) Thus, if we accept non-relativism, we are committed to being intolerant of other cultures, specifically those cultures that practice **x**, **y** and **z**.

The argument goes wrong at step (H). The view that **x** is wrong in a non-relative way does not entail the view that we are obligated to interfere with **x**. We can accept the former view without accepting the latter. To make the point another way, it’s consistent to be a non-relativist and at the same time hold the following thesis:

We should interfere with an action **x** only if: (a) **x** seriously violates a person’s autonomy or causes significant physical or psychological injury; (b) **x** is not done to defend an innocent

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person from harm; and (c) our interference is likely to remedy the harms **x** produces—those mentioned in (a).

Some people will challenge this thesis; others will say that it needs to be clarified or revised before we grant it. For our purposes none of this matters. The important point is that the above statement is consistent with non-relativism, yet a person who sincerely accepts it will seldom interfere with the behavior of others, even when she thinks their behavior is wrong. Perhaps she will **sometimes** interfere with others—e.g., when they are guilty of child abuse, racial discrimination, and so forth—but to do so in **those** cases is not to be intolerant, at least not in a way that counts as a vice. This is significant, for the proponent of (J) surely has in mind a **vice** when he speaks of “being intolerant.” If he does not, his argument fails to fulfill its purpose, which is to throw a negative light on non-relativism.⁷

The next reply to the claims in section 2 is that although relativism does not logically guarantee tolerance, it surely **leads** to tolerance. That is, anyone who believes that morality is relative to culture will almost surely take a “hands off” approach toward other cultures and life-styles.

The key idea here is that as a matter of psychological fact, a belief in relativism usually produces tolerance. I have three comments about this view. First, it remains a piece of armchair psychology until it is backed with thorough empirical research, and to my knowledge it is without such backing. Second, it fails to make relativism more attractive than non-relativism unless (a) the “tolerance” it speaks of is genuine **tolerance**, not apathy or complacency, and (b) it is combined with evidence that no plausible form of non-relativism has the same attractive property—that of fostering tolerance if sincerely believed. But such evidence is not likely to be found, given that many forms of non-relativism (e.g., the Golden Rule) actually **prescribe** a policy of tolerance. Third, although I cannot decisively refute the above view, I find it doubtful, and not merely on **a**

⁷ This raises problems for premise (I) of the above argument (as well as some other problems for relativists who use the argument), but I will let them pass.

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priori grounds. I won't belabor this point; I'll simply close this essay with some of the empirical evidence that spawns my doubts. I have in mind the following quote from a famous (or better, **infamous**) relativist who clearly was not led by his moral theory to take a "hands off" approach toward others:

Relativism is simply a fact Everything I have said and done in these last years is relativism If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and men who claim to be the bearers of an objective immortal truth . . . then there is nothing more relativistic than Fascist attitudes and activity From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value . . . the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable.⁸

- Benito Mussolini

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⁸ The quote is in H. B. Veatch's *Rational Man* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 41. He cites Mussolini's *Diuturna* as the original source. (I do not claim that Mussolini held the precise form of relativism I have been discussing. But I don't think this matters given the purpose to which I am putting the above quote. The differences between cultural relativism and Mussolini's brand of relativism are not such that we should expect widely different psychological effects from the two.)