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## THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT RELATIVISM

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There is something attractive about relativism. There's something nice about being able to tell a person who holds a contrary view that both of us are right. If this were to be the case, we wouldn't even need to agree to disagree. We wouldn't need to keep our distance or find other subjects to discuss when in polite company. We can just relativize! We can say that "your belief is true... for you. But no worries, my (contrary) belief is true, too...for me." How awesome is that?

As good as it may appear, many thinkers (believers and unbelievers alike) find the view that truth varies across individuals or cultures not merely false but also logically incoherent. If one thinks that *all* truth is relative, then this would also apply to the truth of relativism. Said differently, the relativist is asserting *as an absolute and universal truth* that "there is no absolute and universal truth." Wait, what? As should be obvious, one cannot even coherently assert the view to be true. What this means is (and think about this for just a moment) one literally has to misunderstand the view to think that it is true!

To be fair, not every view that takes the label "relativism" is obviously incoherent in this way. Professional philosophers do defend relativism, but they are typically much more sophisticated versions. Many of these still have the same sort of logical problems, in my view, but it is not as easy to say why.

One recent defense of relativism comes in an opinion piece in the *New York Times*. Columbia University professor of philosophy Carol Rovane attempts to sweeten the allure of a certain sort of relativism known as cultural moral relativism, according to

which moral facts vary across cultures.

Rovane couches her discussion as a proposal meant to help in answering the question: “What should we do when we face what are often described as *irresolvable moral disagreements?*” (emphasis in original).<sup>1</sup> What seems to drive the moral relativist is the realization that people from different cultures appear to have very different moral convictions and the reticence to think all views other than my own must be wrong.

Rovane is clear that she is after an *objective* set of moral principles. She explicitly rejects any purely subjectivist picture according to which moral claims are mere expressions of emotion and desire. So what sort of objective relativist view of morality does Rovane defend? These waters get a bit murky. Unfortunately, she never explicitly defines her view.<sup>2</sup> Instead, she illustrates it. This is dangerous for doing moral theory for reasons we’ll make clear in a moment.

Here’s the story as told by Rovane:

*Imagine me to be a middle-aged woman of middle-class origin who grew up in middle America. I went to college, graduated, then went on to get a master’s degree in business, after which I worked on Wall Street and made a lot of money—so much that I retired early. I never married or had children, which was a source of regret to my parents. But they are proud of me. We are all committed to the ideals of liberal individualism, and agree that each of us is responsible for his or her own life, financially and otherwise.*

*Shortly after retirement, I decide to travel, and during a visit to a rural village in the Punjab I meet a woman my age named Anjali. The main facts of her life are: her parents arranged her marriage when she was a very young girl, she was married in her early teens and since then she has had many children. She is already a grandmother. Her life has been organized entirely around family responsibilities.*

*Initially, Anjali finds my decision not to marry or have children repugnant, especially since my parents clearly wished it. She tells me, through an interpreter, that we are all morally obliged to defer to our parents’ wishes. I initially take myself to have a moral disagreement with her, for I believe that I was not morally obliged to defer to my parents’ wish that I marry and have children.<sup>3</sup>*

Rovane goes on to recognize the very different conditions and principles present in their respective cultures and then says, “Owing to these differences in our cultural circumstances, Anjali and I need very different moral truths to live by, in order to navigate the specific moral options that we face. Does this mean that she and I are

bound to live by conflicting values—that we face an irresolvable moral disagreement, about whether it is morally obligatory to defer to our parents’ wishes?”<sup>4</sup>

Her answer to this question is a decisive no. The reason is that Rovane is considering the issue of obligation within what she calls *liberal individualism*, and Anjali is considering the issue within *katarvya*, the name of her cultural moral code. She says, “So Anjali and I never really *contradicted* each other concerning what we owe our parents. She had been affirming that she owes her parents the special duties of *katarvya*, while I had been denying that my parents’ rights include dictating my major life decisions” (emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup> Her relativism is then that moral truths hold objectively but they do not hold universally. That is, Anjali is objectively obligated to fulfill the dictates of *katarvya*, but Rovane, and the rest of us who are not attached to this cultural moral code, are not.

## MORAL OBLIGATIONS

Now I think there are a variety of problems with Rovane’s characterization of this narrative. However, there are two problems that I take to be most pressing.

First, it is not clear to me that we get moral relativism in Rovane’s account in any interesting sense. I think I can concede that she and Anjali have different moral obligations without being a moral relativist. Consider the following. In the USA, we are obligated to drive on the right hand side of the road.<sup>6</sup> Those who live in the UK are under obligation to the very opposite practice. Does this make us moral relativists to concede these different obligations? I think not or, at least, not in an interesting sense.

What Rovane seems to run together is the distinction between an applied ethic and the moral principles that underlie that ethic. Applied ethics is when we reason about whether some practice or action is morally right or wrong (or obligated, permissible, or prohibited). Applied ethics is, in a way, messy, in the sense that it can be very difficult given that cases of actual moral decisions have many factors that have to figure into the moral evaluation. A practice may be abhorrent in one case and perfectly permissible in another, depending on the facts on the ground, as it were.

## Absolute Moral Principles

Consider the question of whether I should kill. The answer depends on the facts of the particular instance in which I find myself. If there is an intruder in my house with clear intent to harm my wife and children and the only way to prevent this from happening is by killing the individual, it seems morally right to kill. However, if someone takes the

last cream-filled donut in my Sunday school class, then I shouldn't kill him or her. There is a sense in which all Rovane has done is identify two cases in which the application of an absolute moral principle is quite different.

What's the absolute moral principle in play here? She seems to have in mind a principle of reciprocity in honoring and respecting our parents' wishes. We might think that this principle holds, given that our parents raised and supported us when we were young. On many views, this seems to create some specific obligations for us with regards to our parents.

In the story, Rovane did not violate her parents' wishes, as they seemed ultimately to want her to do what she thought best for herself, even if this includes remaining unmarried and childless. Anjali acquiesces to the arranged marriage and having multiple children. Both women honor and respect their parents in what looks to be morally appropriate ways consistent with this moral absolute. The cases look very different in the applied sense, but it is not clear that these are in tension any more than driving on different sides of the street when in different countries.

### **Cultural Standards**

Now this principle of reciprocity allows us to say that we do not *always* have to do what our parents say. If Anjali's parents were forcing her into an abusive situation in order to get a large sum of money from the suitor, most would think it morally appropriate for Anjali to resist her parents' wishes. This would be the case for most, but, ironically, it wouldn't be the case for the moral relativist such as Rovane. This is because Rovane thinks that one is *objectively* obligated to follow the moral code of one's culture. And this brings us to the second problem with Rovane's account.

On Rovane's view, if Anjali's parents "sold" her into a sexually and physically abusive situation guaranteed to be raped, beaten, and even killed, the parents have done nothing wrong so long as the practice is consistent with the culture's moral code. If there are no universal moral absolutes, then one is morally obligated to *whatever* the cultural standards, no matter if one is in rural Punjab or Nazi Germany or a member of the Islamic State. That is, this is the case no matter how repugnant these standards may be.

To her credit, Rovane concedes that it is difficult to think that practices such as *sati* (widow burning), female genital mutilation, and honor killing ever could be morally right. We can add to this the sex trade of small children, genocide of minority groups, chattel slavery, and religiously motivated rape and murder, among many other moral atrocities. To most of us, these are straightforward universal moral wrongs, and

most of us are ready to reject any philosophical view that leads to the mere possibility of endorsing such practices, no matter how plausible the argument is for the philosophical view.

But not Rovane. She, with extraordinary consistency, attempts only to soften the blow. She, in effect, says that these practices are endorsed by her view in those cultures but only if there are no other moral standards within the culture, what she calls local truths, that are violated by the person engaging in these practices. She says:

*Of course, it is conceivable that there are no local truths in the light of which sati, female genital mutilation and honor killing would count as wrong. But, the point is, only then—that is, only if there are no local truths that stand in tension with these practices—would the moral relativist have to conclude that our moral differences over them are like the case I described above about Anjali and me, in the respect that both parties are actually right.<sup>7</sup> (Emphasis in original.)*

Now this smells suspiciously like she is attempting to smuggle in some moral absolutes that are true across cultures. She might insist that it is always the case that there are principles of equality and personal liberties in cultures, and it is by these principles that we can say that the above practices are morally wrong for all cultures. But if she says this, then her moral relativism is a distinction without a difference from moral absolutism.

### **Absurd Implications**

It is also extremely implausible to think that there will always be some local moral principles waiting in the wings to evaluate these practices. In fact, it seems to me that it is very often the case that cultural practices have to be opposed with moral considerations that go beyond a particular culture's moral standards. Consider a culture that has a minority population that is overwhelmingly taken to be subhuman, unworthy of individual rights and liberties. It may even be thought that one is doing a moral good by enslaving and treating them harshly and brutally. By hypothesis, there are no local moral standards that would self-regulate this practice. If this is the case, then Rovane is committed to saying (and catch this) that this culture is morally *virtuous* in what they do. Those that brutalize and enslave the minority are, for Rovane, the moral exemplars of that culture on a par with those in our culture that practice kindness, charity, and generosity. Moreover, whoever treats the minority population with kindness and charity are the morally *vicious*, on par with the murderers and rapists in our culture. We seem to have arrived at a conclusion that is so absurd, we should

reject the view that has led us here.

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## NOTES

- 1 Carol Rovane, "Moral Dispute or Cultural Difference?" *New York Times*, November 23, 2015, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/11/23/moral-dispute-or-cultural-difference/>.
- 2 Rovane has a book-length treatment where her views are spelled out at great length, *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- 3 Rovane, "Moral Dispute or Cultural Difference?"
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 This is of course a legal obligation and not necessarily a moral obligation. However, I would suggest that we have moral obligations to follow sensible and just laws, especially when breaking those laws would endanger lives.
- 7 Rovane, "Moral Dispute or Cultural Difference?" A practice may be abhorrent in one case and perfectly permissible in another, depending on the facts on the ground, as it were.