Universalism v. Cultural Relativism

A longstanding debate exists between Universalism and Cultural Relativism, or Relativism, generally framed in terms of the tension between:

1) belief in the existence of universal truths, based in natural laws, that can be ‘known’ objectively, via reason and logic, or, experienced subjectively, through belief in religious/spiritual traditions; and
2) denial of the possibility of the existence of universal truths on the basis that human experience, including perception of the natural world, is a function of language, cultural socialization, and history.

This debate is not new, but remains fresh within the context of escalating tensions between: 1) evolving global imperatives of western democratic institutions in relation to international challenges, and 2) ongoing reassertion of absolute cultural sovereignty among non-western societies, many of whom do not subscribe to, or outright reject, conventional western systems of ethics.

What are the origins of Universalism and Relativism in western thought? Can they be aligned when applied in ‘real’ life, or, are they inherently incompatible?

The following sections outline the primary features Universalism and Relativism, with the understanding that each philosophical orientation is implicitly the product of western cultural thought. That is, while each claims preeminence within the larger framework of western philosophy, each also contains embedded beliefs and values specific to Greek and Judeo-Christian intellectual traditions.

Universalism

The philosophical roots of universalism are evident in western philosophical discourse from the Greeks through the Medieval era, and into the modern period. Universalism is foundational to the evolution of many western democratic ideals and institutions, and has been operationalized on a global scale within a framework of national and international human rights law.

Universalism draws on the a priori belief in the existence of natural laws which are immutable and apply to all human beings, regardless of their belief in, or acceptance of them. When framed in terms of basic human rights, these natural laws are viewed as operating to the benefit of humanity. In essence, a natural law may be defined as ‘a body of unchanging moral principles regarded as the basis for all human conduct.’

Strauss (1968) describes natural law:

“Natural law is a philosophy that certain rights or values are inherent by virtue of human nature and can be universally understood through human reason. Historically, natural law refers to the use of reason to analyze both social and personal human nature to deduce binding rules of moral behavior. The law of nature, as it is determined by nature, is universal. . .

In Western culture, the conception of natural law first appears in Ancient Greek philosophy. . . Natural law is often contrasted with the human-made laws (positive law) of a given political community, society, or state.”

Natural law theories have featured greatly in the philosophies of Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, and Locke, among others. The belief in natural laws is reflected in the American Declaration of Independence, embodied in Jefferson’s words:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”


http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html
The Philosophy Basics website describes Universalism in terms of ethics:

“Moral Universalism is the meta-ethical position that there is a universal ethic which applies to all people, regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexuality or other distinguishing feature, and all the time. A universal ethic is a moral system that applies universally to all of humanity, and thus transcends culture and personal whim. The source or justification of this system is variously claimed to be human nature, a shared vulnerability to suffering, the demands of universal reason, common themes among existing moral codes, or the mandates of religion.

It is the opposite of Moral Relativism, the position that moral propositions do not reflect objective and/or universal moral truths, but instead make claims relative to social, cultural, historical or personal circumstances. It is related to, but not the same as, Moral Realism (the position that certain acts are objectively right or wrong, independent of human opinion), and to Moral Absolutism (the belief that there are absolute standards against which moral questions can be judged, and that certain actions are right or wrong, regardless of the context of the act). To some extent, (particularly if the universal ethic is considered to be derived or inferred from what is common among existing moral codes), it can be seen as a compromise between Moral Absolutism and Moral Realism.

The ancient Greek philosophers Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics believed in a kind of Universalism, opposing the Moral Relativism of the Sophists, as did Immanuel Kant (especially in his theory of the Categorical Imperative), John Locke, John Stuart Mill and Ayn Rand (1905 - 1982).

Many religions, including Christianity and Islam, have morally universalist positions, and regard their system of morality as having been set by a deity, and therefore absolute, universal, perfect and unchangeable. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations can be seen as an example of global efforts to bring a universalist, equal and common moral justice to all people, and Moral Universalism is, at least in part, the basis for modern human rights, and an integral part of any Humanist philosophy.

How do we come to know what the universal morals are? For morals to be truly universal and absolute, they would have to have a universally unquestioned source, interpretation and authority, which critics claim is an impossibility.

The sheer diversity of moral opinions which exists between societies (and even within societies) in the world today suggests that there cannot be a single universal morality.”
http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_moral_universalism.html

Further referencing Universalism in relation to human rights, Gowans (2008) notes:

“Moral universalism (also called moral objectivism or universal morality) is the meta-ethical position that some system of ethics, or a universal ethic, applies universally, that is, for “all similarly situated individuals” regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, or any other distinguishing feature. Moral universalism is opposed to moral nihilism and moral relativism. However, not all forms of moral universalism are absolutist, nor are they necessarily value monist; many forms of universalism, such as utilitarianism, are non-absolutist, and some forms, such as that of Isaiah Berlin, may be value pluralist.

The United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be read as assuming a kind of moral universalism. The drafting committee of the Universal Declaration did assume, or at least aspired to, a “universal” approach to articulating international human rights. Although the Declaration has undeniably come to be accepted throughout the world as a cornerstone of the international system for the protection of human rights, a belief among some that the Universal Declaration does not adequately reflect certain important worldviews has given rise to more than one supplementary declaration.”
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_universalism

Universalism has been criticized as a form of cultural imperialism, which denies or undermines other “inherent” rights of each human and culture/society to determine its own unique set of truths. Universalism has been described as a paradoxical force in human affairs, e.g. while bestowing on individuals and their cultures ‘inherent’ human rights above local thought systems, Universalism leads to an effect of undermining the core value of diversity. This duality fuels the debate about whether or not Universalism undermines the very respect of the individual it appears to seek to protect.

Cultural imperialism is described by Samela (1977) as “the economic, technological and cultural hegemony of the industrialized nations, which determines the direction of both economic and social progress, defines cultural values, and
standardizes the civilization and cultural environment throughout the world.”

Critics of universalism support the sovereignty of individuals and groups to self-determine their beliefs, values, mores, and laws – in essence, every culture is entitled to define and operationalize its own ‘truths’, without regard to the truths of other, often more powerful, groups who seek to impose ‘foreign’ cultural systems. In Marxist and related traditions, Universalism is rejected as a tool employed by the western ruling classes to extend cultural hegemony.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_hegemony

Relativism

In contrast to Universalism, Cultural Relativism, or Relativism, denies the existence of universal truths or laws applicable to all human beings, instead claiming the absolute ‘sovereignty’ of each individual culture or society to determine and apply their unique belief systems. Relativists assert that human beings, despite their ability to reason, lack the capacity and tools to definitively know whether or not natural laws exist. Even if objective evidence of such laws were ascertainable, the right of one culture to impose those laws on another is not recognized or sanctioned. Relativism found much favor among 20th century social scientists, particularly anthropologists and linguists.

“Protagoras and the other Sophists, as early as the 5th Century B.C., are considered the founding fathers of Relativism in the western world, although their beliefs are mainly known through the writings of their opponents, Plato and Socrates. Relativism was also discussed by early Hindu, Jain and Sikh philosophers in India.”
http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_relativism.html

More recently, Relativism was expanded by others, specifically Hume, whose formulation of the relativist worldview elevated its importance to modern philosophers. Hume argued for moral relativism, asserting that no one can know anything for certain. Thus, a person is unable to pass judgment on alternative moral systems because each is subjective in nature. Kant furthered relativism, concurring with Hume regarding the inability to see or prove causality in the objective world. http://repository.cmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1195&context=tepper

Contextualizing the views of Kant, Hooker (1996) describes relativism as:

“...the view that there is no possibility of universal moral law. One cannot categorically assert any principle however basic it may be. One can only say that a principle is accepted in a certain culture. There may be certain principles that happen to operate in all or nearly all cultures such as the prohibition of incest but this is due to some constant feature of how humans organize themselves in societies not to an underlying moral precept. This view is sometimes called moral relativism ethical relativism or meta-ethical relativism”.
http://repository.cmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1195&context=tepper

Thus, in essence, Relativism embodies the belief that ‘All truth is ‘local.’ Younkins (2000) describes relativism as “the view that truth is different for each individual, social group, or historic period.” Further, “multiculturalism, racism, postmodernism, deconstructionism, political correctness, and social engineering are among cultural relativism’s ‘intellectual’ descendants.”

Providing additional detail, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2015) outlines the character of Relativism and the features of the debate it engenders:

“Relativism, roughly put, is the view that truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them. More precisely, ‘relativism’ covers views which maintain that—at a high level of abstraction—at least some class of things have the properties they have (e.g., beautiful, morally good, epistemically justified) not simpliciter, but only relative to a given framework of assessment (e.g., local cultural norms, individual standards), and correspondingly, that the truth of claims attributing these properties holds only once the relevant framework of assessment is specified or supplied.
Relativism has been, in its various guises, both one of the most popular and most reviled philosophical doctrines of our time. Defenders see it as a harbinger of tolerance and the only ethical and epistemic stance worthy of the open-minded and tolerant. Detractors dismiss it for its alleged incoherence and uncritical intellectual permissiveness. Debates about relativism permeate the whole spectrum of philosophical sub-disciplines. From ethics to epistemology, science to religion, political theory to ontology, theories of meaning and even logic, philosophy has felt the need to respond to this heady and seemingly subversive idea. Discussions of relativism often also invoke considerations relevant to the very nature and methodology of philosophy and to the division between the so-called “analytic and continental” camps in philosophy. And yet, despite a long history of debate going back to Plato and an increasingly large body of writing, it is still difficult to come to an agreed definition of what, at its core, relativism is, and what philosophical import it has.”


There are multiple schools of Relativism, described as follows on the Basics of Philosophy website http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_relativism.html:

- **Metaphysical Relativism**: objects, and reality in general, only exist relative to other objects, and have no meaning in isolation.
- **Epistemological Relativism** (or Cognitive Relativism): our knowledge of the real world must be assisted by our mental constructs, and that the truth or falsity of a statement is relative to a social group or individual.
- **Moral Relativism**: moral or ethical propositions do not reflect objective and/or universal moral truths, but instead make claims relative to social, cultural, historical or personal circumstances.
- **Aesthetic Relativism**: philosophical view that the judgment of beauty is relative to individuals, cultures, time periods and contexts, and that there are no universal criteria of beauty.
- **Anthropological Relativism** (or Methodological Relativism): a methodological stance in which a researcher suspends his or her own cultural biases so as to avoid ethnocentrism in an attempt to understand beliefs and behaviors in their local contexts. In general, anthropologists engage in descriptive relativism, as opposed to the normative relativism of philosophy.

Various domains of Relativism have been suggested (Haack, 1996; O’Grady, 2002; Baghramian, 2004; Swoyer, 2010). The following table classifies different relativistic positions according what is being relativized, or its objects, and what is being relativized to, or its domains.

### Domains of Relativization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(I) Individual’s viewpoints and preferences</th>
<th>(II) Historical Epochs</th>
<th>(III) Cultures, society, social groupings</th>
<th>(IV) Conceptual schemes, languages, frameworks</th>
<th>(V) Context of assessment, e.g., taste parameter, assessor’s/agent’s set of beliefs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A) Cognitive norms, e.g., rationality, logic</td>
<td>Alethic Subjectivism/ Epistemic Subjectivism</td>
<td>Alethic and Epistemic Historicism</td>
<td>Alethic Cultural Relativism/ Epistemic Cultural Relativism</td>
<td>Alethic Relativism/Epistemic Relativism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B) Moral values</td>
<td>Moral Subjectivism</td>
<td>Ethical Historicism</td>
<td>Ethical Cultural/ Social Relativism</td>
<td>Moral Conceptual Relativism</td>
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<tr>
<td>(C) Aesthetic values</td>
<td>Aesthetic Subjectivism</td>
<td>Aesthetic Historicism</td>
<td>Aesthetic Cultural/ Social Relativism</td>
<td>Aesthetic Conceptual Relativism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(D) Thoughts, Perception</td>
<td>Thought/percept Subjectivism</td>
<td>Thought/percept Historicism</td>
<td>Thought/percept Cultural/Social Relativism</td>
<td>Thought/percept Conceptual Relativism, Linguistic Relativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E) Propositions or tokens of utterances expressing</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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The authors of the above table and related material note that, traditionally, “relativism is contrasted with:

- Absolutism, the view that at least some truths or values in the relevant domain apply to all times, places or social and cultural frameworks. They are universal and not bound by historical or social conditions. Absolutism is often used as the key contrast idea to relativism.
- Objectivism or the position that cognitive, ethical and aesthetic norms and values in general, but truth in particular, are independent of judgments and beliefs at particular times and places, or in other words they are (non-trivially) mind-independent. The anti-objectivist on the other hand, denies that there is such thing as simply being “true”, “good”, “tasty” or “beautiful” but argues that we can coherently discuss such values only in relation to parameters that have something to do with our mental lives.
- Monism or the view that, in any given area or topic subject to disagreement, there can be no more than one correct opinion, judgment, or norm. The relativist often wishes to allow for a plurality of equally valid values or even truths.
- Realism, when defined in such a way that it entails both the objectivity and singularity of truth, also stands in opposition to relativism.” [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/]

Relativism is closely linked to post-modernism in that it challenges longstanding western European assumptions and values, particularly those assumed during the Enlightenment. Interestingly, in discussing the ancient origins of relativism, the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, an online, peer-reviewed academic source, notes the affinity between the Sophists and post-modernism in the work of Jacques Derrida (1981) and Jean Francois-Lyotard (1985). [http://www.iep.utm.edu/sophists/]

While relativism and post-modernism are not the same, they are closely linked in that both posit human construction of ‘reality’ as opposed to an external, neutral reality that exists for humans to discover through reason and logic.

Duignan (2014) describes post-modernism:

“...in Western philosophy, a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power. ...as a philosophical movement [it] largely a reaction against the philosophical assumptions and values of the modern period of Western (specifically European) history—i.e., the period from about the time of the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries to the mid-20th century. Indeed, many of the doctrines characteristically associated with postmodernism can fairly be described as the straightforward denial of general philosophical viewpoints that were taken for granted during the 18th-century Enlightenment, though they were not unique to that period.” [https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy]

In line with post-modernists, relativists would likely assert that:

- there is no objective, ‘natural’ reality “whose existence and properties are logically independent of human beings—of their minds, their societies, their social practices, or their investigative techniques”;
- there is no objective Truth ‘out there’ and science does not have the capacity or tools to prove its external existence;
- human reason and logic do not necessarily lead to and improved human condition for all peoples;
- reason and logic are not universally valid—i.e., their laws are the same for, or apply equally to, any thinker and any domain of knowledge;
- there is no such thing as a universal human nature, but that human faculties and other characteristics are not inherent, but transferred through social processes in each unique culture; and
there is no objective reality that is not dependent on language for its description, and all language represents a specific cultural or social viewpoint.

https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy

Relativism has been criticized on the basis that there are certain 'real world' behaviors or situations that required application of a Universalist set of ethics or morals, e.g. Relativism breaks down in the face of some repugnant human behaviors perceived to threaten the life, safety or free-will of individuals, or cultural groups. For example, Universalists claim the prerogative to 'impose' human rights to individuals or social groups when confronted with such events as ethnic 'cleansing', cannibalism, torture, etc.

Sources and Suggested Readings


