Relativism and Subjectivism

I. Introduction: Sometimes practices believed to be morally permissible in one culture are thought to be abhorrent in other cultures. Some cultures find bribery to be morally permissible, some do not. Some cultures are cannibalistic, many are not. Some cultures marry off young girls to older men, while others believe this to be a horrible crime. The ancient Greeks thought love between two men (particularly teacher and student) was the most profound kind of relationship, while our culture generally disapproves of such relations. Some natives of Canada and North America practiced ritual strangulation of their old by the young. Some cultures circumcise their females so they cannot feel pleasure from sex. Is it possible for us to make general, objective moral assessments of these cultural practices? Is there some objective, culturally independent standpoint from where we can pass unbiased judgment? Moral theories purport to do just that--to objectively assess the morality of actions and practices, irrespective of culture. But if right and wrong is a matter of cultural or subjective standards, the purpose of moral theories would be undermined--there would be no possibility of objective moral assessment.

II. Relativism, Subjectivism and Science: relativists and subjectivists (both anti-realists) hold that there is no objective right or wrong. They usually enjoy contrasting morality and science to make their point.

A. Progress, convergence and universal validity: science has made great progress in uncovering the nature of the world, and those who investigate that world end up at or converge upon the same conclusions regardless of personal temperament or cultural background; science is therefore universally valid, yielding conclusions that hold regardless of the culture of the participants.

-on the other hand, there is still massive disagreement even over the most basic moral issues, and one’s temperament or cultural background greatly influences one’s conclusions in ethics, unlike science.

**So--the relativist argues-- there is no realm of objective moral truth or reality that is comparable to the natural world investigated by science.

B. The unobservable entity example: Scientists have a need to assume the existence of unobservable entities such as protons, quarks, super-strings etc. to explain natural phenomena. The idea is that, while we cannot directly observe these entities themselves, we can directly observe their effects. Hence, it is wholly reasonable, and, many would say, rationally necessary, to assume that they exist independently of human minds. For example, when a scientist observes a vapor trail in a cloud chamber, it is rationally necessary to assume that something exists to cause that phenomenon- a proton--even if he cannot directly observe that entity. Such is not the case with moral values: we can easily get away with explaining why and how people make moral judgments or act the way they do without assuming that moral values exist in the world independently of human minds. All we need to do is to assume that the individual makes moral judgments and acts according to her own personal moral standards or those of her society. The intuition behind this motivation for moral anti-realism is simply this: if there is no rational necessity to postulate entities such as moral values in the world, then it is entirely unreasonable to do so; we ought not clutter the world with entities when we have no good reason to suppose that they are there.

II. Subjectivism or Individual Ethical Relativism: ethical judgments are the expressions of the moral outlook & attitudes of individual people.
- no person’s moral beliefs are any better or more correct than any other, for that would assume some objective standard against which those beliefs can be assessed.

III. Cultural Relativism: ethical values vary from society to society and the basis for moral judgments lies in social or cultural norms.
- a person must look to the norms of his or her culture to determine what the right thing to do is.
- no society’s views are better or more correct than any other’s.

IV. Arguments in Support of Relativism and Subjectivism: below are arguments in support of relativism and subjectivism; as you will see, all of the arguments have responses and therefore fail to establish the truth of relativism or subjectivism.
A. Diversity of Moral Viewpoints: whereas investigations in science and history tend to end in agreement, morality is characterized by disagreement; people and cultures disagree to such a great extent about morality, that it seems unlikely that morality could be objective like science.
   1. Responses
       a) What seem like ethical disputes might not always be ethical disputes--hence, the extent of disagreement is exaggerated.
          i. Example: One person might believe we are morally obligated to reduce greenhouse gases while another does not think we have such an obligation, yet this might simply be a dispute over the reality of global warming; the two might totally agree on their moral values, namely, to protect the earth, ourselves and future generations, yet disagree on whether greenhouse gases raise the earth’s temperature. Their difference in moral judgment is explained by their different understanding of scientific fact.
       ii. Example: The possible war in Iraq. One person might think we are obligated to go to war and another might disagree, yet the two may believe that we have a strong obligation to protect innocent people from tyranny. What they don’t agree on might be whether Sadaam possesses weapons of mass destruction or, if he does, whether he will use them.
   b) The mere existence of disagreement over a moral issues does not entail that there is no objective resolution; even scientists are often divided over problems at the forefront of science.
   c) Too much emphasis is placed on disagreement over moral issues. Sure, if we concentrate on abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, homosexuality etc., it will seem as if morality couldn’t be objective given the diversity of opinion. But think about how much agreement there is over the ethics of murder, genocide, slavery, dishonesty, rape, theft, child molestation etc. People agree on a lot of moral issues, but, unfortunately, the cases of disagreement are emphasized by the relativist. If we concentrate on agreement and disagreement, though, ethics seems a lot closer in objectivity to science: scientists disagree over a number of issues but work within a framework of shared belief. So it is in ethics: we disagree over a number of controversial issues, but for the most part there is massive agreement.

B. Moral Uncertainty: we often have great difficulty deciding what the right thing to do is; you’d think that if morality really was was objective, there’d be clearer resolutions to moral problems.
   1. Response: the fact that we’re uncertain about the right thing to do does not at all prove that there is no right thing to do. As a matter of fact, we are often disturbed and dissatisfied when we cannot figure out the right thing to do, which suggests that we really do believe that there is a right thing to do, and that it is important for us to know what it is.
C. Situational Differences: People, situations, cultures and times differ in significant ways. How could what is right for one person, time, situation or culture be right for every other? Different situations pose different challenges to people, and meeting different challenges means making different moral choices.

1. Response: Objectivism does allow factoring in the context of an action. There is an important difference between moral realism or objectivism and moral absolutism. Moral absolutism is the view that moral rules are exceptionless. For example, an absolutist might hold that it is always wrong to steal. So, even if one’s life depended on it, it would be wrong to steal a loaf of bread if one were starving. The realist or objectivist, however, need not say it is always wrong to steal. The realist might believe that the reduction of extreme suffering is an objective value and therefore one can steal a loaf of bread for that reason; that is, the realist or objectivist might say that it would be the objectively right thing to do to steal a loaf of bread if one were starving.

V. Problems for Cultural Relativism and Subjectivism

A. Cultural Relativism

1. From which group am I supposed to get my values? My country, my hemisphere, my family, my region (e.g. north/south)? And if I’m supposed to get my values from one of these in particular, why should it be that one and not another? The choice would seem arbitrary.

2. No agreement: there are many moral issues for which there is no consensus resolution--for example, any moral issue in this book. If there is no prevailing cultural view, does that mean there simply is no right or wrong in cases such as euthanasia, abortion, affirmative action etc?

3. Change of cultural opinion: what happens when the cultural consensus changes? Take, for example, the Vietnam war. At one point, our society supported this war, but later the support was lost. This would mean, according to the relativist, that the war was just at one time but unjust at another. But this is absurd: the war became unpopular because people realized that the war was unjust all along.

4. No moral progress: the notion of moral progress would not make sense according to relativism. A society’s views cannot improve because whatever the society thinks is right at the time is right. Hence society could not progress from a worse to a better position; the most we could say is that the society’s view had changed. This would mean that we didn’t make progress by ending slavery or giving women their rights.

5. So-called “moral reformers” act unethically: if the cultural consensus determines what is right, then anyone who tries to change the consensus would be acting unethically. But this would include moral reformers such as Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi--people who we think are doing something good and just.

6. No way to resolve intercultural moral conflicts: two cultures that disagreed over a moral issue could not reasonably resolve their conflict because there would be no culturally independent standard by which disputes would be settled. Both cultures would simply be right.

VI. The Issue of Tolerance: many people endorse relativism because they believe it to be a more tolerant view. They reason that since each culture has its own ethical standards, and there is no objective standard to speak of, one culture cannot criticize another culture for having an inferior set of values. But tolerance and relativism are in no way related. A cultural relativist cannot insist that cultures be tolerant of one another because tolerance might not be a value in those cultures.
cultures. Indeed, if a culture values intolerance, then the relativist must hold that such a culture must be intolerant of others.

In general, if the relativist says that we ought to be tolerant of other cultures, she is being flagrantly inconsistent. She is assuming that being tolerant is an objective moral principle to which everyone should adhere.