

Phil 2, October 15, 2007

Last time, we tried to understand what relativism says. Today we will consider views about how accepting relativism should affect what we think and do. Some think that that if we are relativists, then we ought to *tolerate* moral practices of other cultures that differ from our own. After all, if we are relativists, then we think that those practices are right for that culture.

“In its vulgar and unregenerate form,” Williams writes, relativism consists of the following three propositions:

- (1) “Right” means “right for a given society.”
- (2) “Right for a given society” is to be understood in a functionalist sense.
- (3) Therefore, it is wrong for people in one society to condemn, interfere with, etc., the values of another society.

Williams spies an immediate problem with (3). (3) uses “wrong” in a universal, or nonrelative, sense—i.e., wrong no matter what your society is—, whereas (1) claims that “wrong” has only a relative sense—i.e., wrong only in this society. The closest thing to (3) that (1) will allow is:

- (4) It is wrong *for us* to condemn, interfere with, etc., the values of another society.

Why can't the relativist rewrite (3) as the long conjunction of claims using the relative sense of “wrong”?

- (5) It is wrong for us to condemn, etc., the values of another society, and it is wrong for the Ashanti to condemn, etc., the values of another society, and it is wrong for the Ancient Greeks to condemn, etc., the values of another society (and so on for every society).

This list seems pretty close to (3). So what's the problem with this argument?

The problem might be that the vulgar relativist believes that what is right for a given society is determined by the beliefs and practices of that society. Suppose, then, that there is a society that has intolerant beliefs and practices: beliefs and practices that encourage the condemnation of and interference with the values of other societies. Take the Spanish in the New World. Then the vulgar relativist must say that it is not wrong for the Spanish to condemn, interfere with, etc. the values of another society. This claim *is* incompatible with (5)—which was our surrogate for (3).

And Williams's vulgar relativist indeed believes that what is right for a given society is determined by the beliefs and practices of that society. For Williams's vulgar relativist accepts (2), which says that “right for a given society” is to be understood in a functionalist sense. Now, what Williams means by this, I take it, is that what is right for a society is roughly whatever promotes the society's survival. And presumably what promotes an established society's survival are its beliefs and practices.

To sum up: If relativism holds that what is right for a given society depends on the beliefs and practices of that society, and if there has been (or could be) a society with beliefs and practices of intolerance of other societies, then relativism is *incompatible with* the claim that it is wrong for any society to be intolerant of other societies.

If relativism is *incompatible* with the universal principle of toleration, then either relativism is *false*, or it does *not entail* the universal principle of toleration. Why then is it so tempting to think that accepting relativism gets us the universal principle of toleration?

Here is one possibility. Suppose Cortez comes across an Aztec human sacrifice and says to himself: “I will stop what they are doing, because it is wrong for anyone to engage in human sacrifice.” If we are relativists, then we believe that Cortez is incorrect. It is not true that it is wrong for anyone to engage in human sacrifice. It is not wrong for the Aztecs, since that is their culture.

Notice, however, that we believe that Cortez is incorrect in the sense of having and acting on a *false belief*. It does not follow that Cortez is incorrect in the sense of doing anything *morally wrong*. In other words, if we are relativists, then we believe that anyone who interferes with members of another society on the grounds that they are violating a universal moral principle acts on the basis of a mistaken belief. But it does not follow that he acts morally wrongly. Still less, if he interferes with members of another society on *other* grounds, such as that he simply finds disagreement annoying.

Here is a second possibility. Suppose we are relativists. Cortez acts intolerantly, preventing the Aztecs from doing what, in our view, is right for Aztec society. And suppose we accept the vulgar relativist’s premise (2), which says that what is right for a society is what promotes its survival. Then we believe that Cortez has prevented the Aztecs from doing what promoted the survival of their society, thereby seriously harming the members of that society. Hence, as relativists, we believe that Cortez has done something wrong by acting intolerantly.

Notice, first, that this argument assumes that the cure is worse than the disease. Arguably, the benefit from abolishing human sacrifice outweighs the damage done to Aztec society. More importantly, this argument assumes a universal moral principle: that it is wrong for anyone to harm others. So it is itself incompatible with relativism.

In sum, relativism supports toleration only weakly, if at all. When we read John Stuart Mill’s classic, *On Liberty*, we will see whether universal moral principles—utilitarianism, in fact—might do a better job.