

Moral Relativism under Criticism

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Abstract

Ethical relativism is one of the most important issues of ethical philosophy meaning that the values and ethical judgments are not stable. This issue is such important that an individual's approach and position concerning relativism or non-relativism of ethical values significantly effects on the viewpoints, worldview and legal and social conditions of other people. Our goal is to provide a clear explanation of relativism and especially its reasons as well as to examine them. In this study, we have examined different types of relativism. In descriptive relativism, we pointed out that such type of relativism would not judge the accuracy or inaccuracy of ethical values and therefore, discussing on examination of relativism reasons was useless. In normative relativism, we mentioned that their main reasons were based on cultural differences, diversity of moral viewpoints and lack of ethical values. In this regard, we have shown that values exist and that cultural differences and diversity of ethical viewpoints are not proofs to relativity. We also showed in Meta ethical relativism that such type of relativism has proved Meta ethical relativism by using descriptive relativism and denial of ethical values and certainty of translation. To criticize these reasons, we showed that ethical values exist and that ethical relativism may not be considered as a proof to the Meta ethical relativity. Research method in this paper is of descriptive and analytical type.

Keywords: ethics, relativism, meta ethical relativism, descriptive ethical relativism, normative relativism, ethical absolutism.

INTRODUCTION

Discussing on the ethical relativism is one of the most important debates in ethical philosophy. Relativism may be considered as a theory that denies a certain type of general and universal facts. It considers different areas such as culture and ethics to be related to a specific framework and denies the fact that such framework is the only actual and most rational framework. From the viewpoint of this school of thought, authenticity of all ethical principles depends on the selection of cultures, communities and/or people. This approach has become a challenge for some people in the Islamic world causing the Islamic researchers and community to face a serious problem. So far, if our problem with ethics was that we could not practically prevent from immoral acts, based on relativism we cannot even theoretically consider such behaviors inappropriate. This is because according to relativism, first of all, right and wrong may not be distinguished and no behavior or viewpoint may be criticized. It is just enough to claim that it is ethical and in such case we have to consider that as legitimate. Secondly, the most noble and dirty works are placed in just one position since a rational arbitration may not be conducted between them. Thirdly, ethical values will change into rootless, artificial and arbitrary issues because no reasonable basis remains for ethics. Individually, the result of such ideology will be a

sense of absurdity since human gentility can be achieved only in the light of alignment with truth and virtue. Socially, when people do not attach any importance to the value principles, they only accept them cautiously and if they do not feel any danger from other people, those principles may not hinder them from their greed and therefore, ethical rules will be so sensitive in the community. Finally, it can be said that based on relativism, ethics loses its existential philosophy and this will be a major disaster.

The most important types of relativism include descriptive, normative and Meta ethical relativisms. Absolutism is in contrast with relativism. Absolutism means that at least some of the fundamental principles and ethical judgments are unchangeable and do not depend on people's tastes and contract, but they depend on actual conditions. It can be said that the history of ethical relativism goes back to the sophist's age; however, some of its traces can be found in the periods before ancient Greece in the schools of thought such as pironism and academic skeptics. Yet, it can be said that relativism was officially begun by the sophists in the 5th century BC. Based on the sophist's viewpoint, it is not possible to establish an ethical system based on a single and unchangeable criterion. In the middle centuries, ethics finds a religious aspect and becomes the

unique basis for the Bible and church's official understanding and reading. In renaissance, rationality supersedes the Bible. The centrality of the Bible is questioned and the understandings of the church master are replaced with public understanding. These interpretations from the Bible are noting but personal interpretations and understandings resulting in relativism to be re-presented because on this basis, anybody is authorized to interpret the Bible based on his/her own taste. These interpretations were gradually extended from religious area into ethical area and became the center of ethical evaluations, individual tastes and social contracts. Our discussion in this paper is focused on examining the reasons of relativism. For this purpose, at first we examine and then criticize the reasons of descriptive, normative and Meta ethical relativisms. In this way, our goal is to achieve anti-relativism and we did not intend to prove the opposite point of relativism as it requires a separate research. Furthermore, it is notable that the presented reasons are Meta personal. This means that by mentioning the reasons of relativism, we did not address the East or West nature of the reasons. It should be noted that most of the reasons are introduced by the west philosophers since the most certain reasons are presented in their viewpoints. Research method in this paper is a descriptive and analytic method with presumptions including 1) Observance of ethics regardless of having a relativist viewpoint is considered appropriate in all communities; and 2) Different human communities have different and diverse ethical cultures.

The importance and advantage of this paper for professors is to draw their attentions towards the reasons of relativism and towards the most recent critics made to this viewpoint and its reasons (especially considering the viewpoints of some of the Islamic scientists). For students, the advantage and importance of this paper include general and clear orientation with the issue of relativism and the relativists' reasons.

The constraints and problems include:

- 1-having trouble accessing the original resources and inevitably using secondary resources or translated copies.
- 2- No easy access to experts and advisors to discuss about in this case.
- 3- Struggling to explain philosophical and meta-ethical concepts in simple words.

EXAMINING THE DESCRIPTIVE RELATIVISM

Descriptive Relativism

By relativity in this branch, it is meant that the original ethical values exist in relation to issues such as culture or personal viewpoints and sometimes these different original ethical values are in contradiction (Frankena, 2007:22). According to the

descriptive ethical relativism, there are deep and extensive disagreements in ethics. These disagreements are much more important and much stronger than any reasoning which may exist in this regard (Gowans, Chris, 2011). In fact, this type of relativism merely seeks to describe ethical acts of different communities and never addresses their appropriateness or inappropriateness. Rather, it intends to describe and specify the disagreements of different communities and traditions in ethical works. Descriptive relativism has two forms: 1) Cultural descriptive relativism, 2) Individual descriptive relativism.

1.1.1) Cultural descriptive relativism:

This type of relativism describes different ethics in different societies and cultures and concludes that ethics depends on culture (Mesbah, 2001:142 ;Pojman No.13 and 14 :4)

1.1.2) Individual descriptive relativism:

Reporting different viewpoints of different individuals, this type of relativism comes to the conclusion that ethics depends on individuals. "A is good", i.e., I like A and no one can say that what I like is bad.

1.2) Criticizing the Descriptive Relativism

Since this type of relativism does not judge on the rightness or wrongness of the main ethical values, discussing n the critics and examination of the reasons of descriptive relativism is useless. Therefore, it is better to examine and criticize their claims and not their reasons. To criticize this idea, the following points may be noted:

First of all, they are unaware of the point that some of the ethical beliefs are accepted and agreed by all cultures. Which culture may not blame and reject murder or lying? Which culture may not accept justice and honesty? In fact, it can be said that this claim is based on an incomplete induction since many cases may be found in which some of the obligations are fixed in all communities and cultures despite different cultures (Pojman, ibid:8) Secondly, we should make a difference between social traditions and habits and ethical values while it seems that relativists have not taken such differences into account and have come to such conclusion by not separating values and traditions.(Mesbah Yazdi, ibid:152 ;Frankena, ibid:229) Thirdly, it seems that descriptive relativism considers interference as a proof to the relativity in ethics. For example, two people (A & B) believe in the principle that "Honesty is good and lying is bad"; however, it has been observed that in a single issue, A tells the truth but B does not tell the truth to save the life of another person. Observing this case, one may not come to the conclusion that the main ethical values are different because these differences are the result of a practical

bottleneck in specific conditions. Fourthly, assuming these differences, mere difference in the values cannot be a proof to their relativity. Fifth, there is no rational reason by which lack of a unique and universal truth may be concluded from the differences. In other words, understanding and acknowledgement of truth by people is not a requirement for its existence.

EXAMINATION OF NORMATIVE RELATIVISM

2.1) Definition and types of normative relativism

Relativity in this branch of ethics means that principally, what is correct or good for an individual or a society is not necessarily correct or good for another person or community even though in similar conditions. Frankona says, "What someone thinks of as right or good is not the same as another one thinks (this is the same descriptive relativism), but what is really right or good in one case is not the same as others."(ibid:228) As it seems, this type of ethical relativism rejects stability in ethical principles and values and explains that one may not consider the principles and values of a community, group or tradition as good and the other as bad, rather all of them should be considered the same. This type of relativism appears in two forms: 1) cultural normative relativism, 2) mind-oriented normative relativism.

2.1.1) Cultural normative relativism:

Based on cultural relativism, ethics is associated with culture. A is good, i.e., A agrees with the ethics current in the society. Therefore, something may be considered right in a culture but wrong in another culture.(Gensler, Harry J,1385,43). People in a society may believe that their viewpoints are correct ethical viewpoints. But cultural normative relativism rejects stability in ethical principles and values and explains that no community has a better viewpoint than other communities from Meta cultural viewpoint and all of them should be considered the same. (Mackinnon ,1988:13-14)

2.1.2) mind-oriented normative relativism:

According to this type of relativism, ethics depends on people. A is good means that I like A. .(Gensler, ibid:43) on this basis, any one has its own special ethical viewpoint. Despite descriptive relativism, this type of relativism judges on the rightness or wrongness of the individual's ethical viewpoint and does not consider one viewpoint better than the other.

Explaining the Reasons of Normative Relativism:

It seems that relativism claim is generally based on two reason: 1) One reasoning is based on sociological, anthropological and historical studies; and 2) Another reasoning is based on the fact that there is no good or evil and we ourselves establish ethical values and principles. In this section, we examine them.

2.2.1) Reasoning based on anthropological studies:

To explain that cultural differences result in different ethical systems, Roth Bendic points out that cooperation and friendship are good and honorable in some communities, but these two virtues are considered as bad and undesirable in one of the tribes of Melanesia. He then concludes from these differences that it is the cultures that specify good and evil and not the ethics.(shomali, second period:5) William Graham Sumner (1906) explains this issue as follows: "The right way is the way passed by our ancestors. Traditions are reliable themselves and may not be proved by experience. Correct meaning is hidden in the customary methods and not outside them. It does not have an independent origin and is not subject to testing and examination. Whatever exists in the customary practices is right and correct since they are ancient and therefore, their validity which arises from the souls of ancestors is inside them. When we face customary practices, we are at the end of self –analysis. (ibid:2)" Therefore, based on the studies of sociologists, anthropologists, etc. relativists argue that different cultures have resulted in non-existence of some general, universal and comprehensive ethical facts and since there is more than one correct ethical system, they cannot be judged because evaluation and judgment requires an independent and public criterion. In a system that lacks such a criterion, no judgment can be made between the ethical systems which are right and authentic to the same level.(Kashefi,1999:11-13)

2.2.2) Reasoning based on the lack of values:

Relativists essentially deny any good and evil in the ethical principles and values. They believe that ethics depends on the individuals and not on the society. It is the individual who forms his own ethical beliefs and principles by creating concepts such as profit and loss, struggle for survival, etc. and uses them in his own behavior in such asuch as way to be real and tangible and to assist him in his decisions. Therefore, based on this approach, values are equal to the number of all people and all of them are reliable and have equal positions. This principle may never be challenged and judged out of the framework of the individual since the origin of these principles is the individual himself and nothing else.

2.2.3) Reasoning based on diverse situations:

Ethical conditions and situations are so different and diverse that one may not consider all of them as subject to one judgment and may not consider something as right or wrong in all situations and for all people. (Mackinnon ,ibid,p.14)

Criticizing the reasons of normative relativism

2.3.1) Cultural differences are not impediments for establishment of a universal ethical system: Some relativists consider cultural relativism as a proof to normative relativism while this is not correct because still there are debates on the descriptive relativism. Furthermore, even though we accept descriptive

relativism, it is not enough alone to prove normative relativism because by examining the cases in which there seems to be fundamental differences in the ethical values and behaviors, we come to the conclusion that there is no difference in the basic values. (Shomali, same article:5) For example, in the Melanesian tribes in which cooperation and friendship are rejected, they believe that anybody should challenge his own problems to defend him and his family and to supply them and therefore, unnecessary sympathy hinders him to achieve this goal. In fact, different behaviors of Melanesian tribes with other tribes arise from the manners of using ethical principles and not from any contradiction in the fundamental values such as cooperation and friendship because if kindness and cooperation, for example, were anti-values from the Melanesians' viewpoint, first of all, they should kill some of their babies to reduce their livelihood problems and second of all, there was no sense of kindness and cooperation among the family members and in that case the family structure and system would collapse and no family could be formed while kindness and cooperation are considered as values among these tribes.

2.3.2) Some values are common among different cultures:

(Extreme) relativists deny the existence of even one stable ethical principle among different communities. This is while we implicitly believe a series of stable ethical principles and consider them as the requirements for a good life. For example, there are some contracts between us indicating that we believe in fulfilling our promises. In all these cases therefore, we implicitly bind ourselves to a series of stable principles such as honesty, fulfillment of promises, etc. (pojman, ibid:13) By considering this example, it can be said that relativists are unaware of the fact that there is a fundamental and basic agreement on good and bad issues among all humans. (Kashefi, ibid:13)

2.3.3) Despite Relativism, judgment between the values is allowable:

Relativists believe that since there is more than one correct ethical system, no judgment can be made between them because evaluation and judgment requires an independent and public criterion. This is while there is no such criterion. (ibid:13) The problem with this claim is that first of all, there is no rational requirement between the existence of more than one correct ethical system and arbitration between them because it does not matter if a person accepts that there are other correct or justified ethical systems in addition to his own. For example, if slavery or racialism was current in a society, is it right to condemn that from ethical viewpoint? (ibid:16) Secondly, relativists claim that one should not judge on the principles and values of other people. This is while they judge on the principles and values of other

people in the same way as they do on their own values. In fact, they do not even abide their own idea. (ibid:17)

2.3.4) Different conditions are not a proof to the relativity nature of ethics:

Undoubtedly, people face different ethical conditions, but it cannot be concluded that it is impossible to have a common ethics. It should be noted that lying is always bad in any condition and must be rejected. But sometimes this principle may be breached in some conditions, e.g., to save the life of an innocent man from death. This is not in contradiction with the absoluteness of ethical values. In fact, although there are ethical objective values and truths, they may change depending on different situations where an ethical action which is bad in a situation (such as rewarding Ahmad when he commits a bad action) becomes good in another situation (such as rewarding Ahmad when he commits a good action). In these cases therefore, what changes is not the goodness or badness of ethical values, but it is the ethical situations that cause an action to be considered as good in a special condition while it is considered bad in ordinary conditions. In other words, no change of principles and values may be concluded by changing the title and judgment because the object goes out of the evidence of a topic which is the subject of a judgment and becomes the evidence of another topic which is the subject of another judgment (Abolghasemzadeh, 2007:7) Secondly, it seems that the concept of judgment does not contain ethical judgments. In other words, goodness and badness of ethical values are not absolutely determined by the judgment, but the judgment merely directs and guides the individual to face with different social and cultural issues and encourage them to do or not to do the action. Therefore, change in the judgments as the result of change in the topics is not related to the basic ethical principles and values.

Examining the Meta ethical relativism

3.1) Definition of Metal ethical relativism:

According to the approach of Meta ethical relativism concerning the main ethical judgments, there is no reasonable and reliable objective method to justify one against the other. As a result, two main contradictory judgments may have the same reliabilities (Frankena, ibid:228 ; Edwards, 2006)

3.2) Examining the reasons of Meta ethical relativism:

It seems that the most important support for meta ethical relativism is based on 1) descriptive relativism, 2) Subjective nature of ethical values.

3.2.1) Reasoning based on descriptive relativism:

Some people have used cultural and ethical diversity among different communities with different people and have come to the conclusion that there is no single ethical truth (Shomali, same article :11

;Frankena, *ibid*,184-185) To explain this issue, it should be noted that first of all, the difference between ethical rules does not require all the rules to be equally justified. Secondly, there is no reasonable relation between people's belief and what which is real. Different beliefs arise from different approaches of individuals to the truth and generally from the worldviews of individuals or different communities and not from difference in the fundamental principles where the individuals look at the truth from their own views. But sometimes relativism adds an additional introduction to the descriptive relativism and proves Meta ethical relativism by such addition. They believe that all ethical principles take their reliabilities from culture. To evaluate such reasoning, it should be noted that firstly, relativism have stated no rational reason on the fact that "ethics has no independent reality from the community". They have only considered that as a proven introduction which seems incorrect because an unproven claim may never be considered as a base and support for a rational reasoning. Secondly, relativists have not pointed out in their arguments the adoption process of ethical principles by the cultures. Therefore, considering that the community has accepted, before adoption, an ethical principle or another contradictory principle or it has had no special viewpoint on that, the question is that how a society accepts something as a value or ethical principle that it did not accept before.(*ibid*:14) Thirdly, if we assume the claim that ethics is associated with culture, why people should take an ethical position while they know that ethics has no dependent reality or it comes from the people and society, or why ethics even in these communities is binding for people?(*ibid*:14-15)

3.2.2) Reasoning based on mind-orientation of ethical values:

One of the important questions concerning ethical goodness and badness is related to their origins (the goods and evils are rooted in a real issue or there is no truth beyond the values). Two views are available to answer this question. The first view is related to those who believe that there is a reality beyond the values. Some people like Eshaereh believe that God is the origin of good and bad and it is only God that can show good and bad as well as happiness and perfection way. Man is too weak to understand anything through his perceptions. The second view whose followers are people such as Gergias and Airomeci believe that there is no reality and truth beyond the values and that good and bad are rooted in the man's feelings and mind. The argument based on the mentality of ethical values was first introduced in Greece by people such as Protagoras and Gergias and was then developed in the manner that it may be found in the words of extremists who believe in absolute idealism. In this regard, Gergias believes that "Nothing exists except me", (of course, his goal is his personal and individual truth and not a kind of

human), "Therefore, if I exist, other creatures like animals and plants are made by my mind. In fact, world is defined by me and my mentalities."(Malekian, 2000:161) To prove that "Nothing Exits", he begins his argument with the sentence that "Nothing is nothing" and says, "There is either a difference or no difference between existence and non-existence. If there is no difference, there will be nothing because on the one hand nothing does not exist and on the other hand if it exists, it is not different from nothing and thus, existence does not exit. But if there is a difference between these two, nothing will be existence and since existence is the opposite of nothing, existence will not exit (Asgari Yazdi, 2002:90) The result is that the proposition "Nothing Exits" is proved. To criticize Gergias's argument, it can be said that he has not distinguished between existence, creature and nothing. On the other hand, if existence is assumed for nothing, it will not be nothing any further. Furthermore, the sentence "Nothing is nothing" provides us with no news. Therefore, it is of no use and has only one concept, while in a news carrying sentence, there should be two independent concepts and informing the addressee of a real relation between the subject and predicate. The other point is that "Is" in the sentence "Nothing is nothing" does not mean "Exits" but has a linking role. Therefore, of "Nothing is nothing" does not mean that "nothing exits" and it physically exits. Furthermore, even if we assume that "nothing exits", it cannot be concluded that existence is not a creature. For example, from the sentence "Man does not exit" it cannot be concluded that man does not exit unless we say that nothing and existence are contradictory.(*ibid*:91) Another criticism is that when Gergias says that there is nothing in his mind, in order to prove his claim he should say for example that reality should have a special criterion and since nothing has such a criterion, it is not real. In fact, Gergias believes a reality which plays the role of a criterion, so he cannot say that there is no reality.

CONCLUSION

Relativism was officially begun by the sophists in the 5th century BC. Based on the sophism thoughts, it is not possible to establish an ethical system based on a single and unchangeable criterion. Absolutism is in contrast to relativism. Ethical absolutism means that at least some of the fundamental principles and ethical judgments may not be change. The most important types of ethical relativism include descriptive, normative and Meta ethical relativisms. Descriptive relativism means that there are noble ethical values in relation to issues such as culture or personal views and sometimes these different noble ethical values are in contradiction. Descriptive relativism consists of cultural descriptive relativism and individual descriptive relativism. Normative relativism means that principally what is good for a person or a society is not necessarily correct or good

for the other even though in similar conditions and situations. This type of relativism has two forms 1) cultural normative relativism and 2) mental or mind-oriented normative relativism. Based on the cultural relativism, ethics depends on culture. A is good means that the ethics in the society is agreeable for A. Based on individual relativism, ethics is associated with individuals. A is good means that I like A. Despite individual and cultural descriptive relativisms, normative relativism judges on the right or wrong natures of the individuals' ethical viewpoints and it never considers one viewpoint better than another view. Generally, normative relativism claim is based on two arguments. One argument is based on sociological, anthropological and historical studies. Based on the studies conducted by the sociologists, anthropologists, etc., relativists argue that different cultures have resulted in non-existence of some general, universal and comprehensive ethical facts and since there is more than one correct ethical system, they cannot be judged because evaluation and judgment requires an independent and public criterion. In a system that lacks such a criterion, no judgment can be made between the ethical systems which are right and authentic to the same level. The other argument is based on the fact that there is no good and bad and we create the ethical values and principles. Ethics depends on the individuals and not on the society and it is the individual that forms his own ethical beliefs and principles by creating concepts such as profit and loss, struggle for survival, etc. and uses them in his own behavior in such a way to be real and tangible and to assist him in his decisions. Therefore, based on this approach, values are equal to the number of all people and all of them are reliable and have equal positions. This principle may never be challenged and judged out of the framework of the individual since the origin of these principles is the individual himself and nothing else.

The normative relativism's approach is not correct because it uses descriptive relativism to prove its reasons while there are still some debates on the descriptive relativism. Furthermore, even though we accept descriptive relativism, it is not enough alone to prove normative relativism because by examining the cases in which there seems to be fundamental differences in the ethical values and behaviors, we come to the conclusion that there is no difference in the basic values. According to view of Meta ethical relativism, there is no reasonable and reliable objective procedure to justify one of the main ethical judgments against the other. As a result, two contradictory judgments may be similarly reliable. The main support of Meta ethical relativism is based on the followings:

1) Descriptive relativism: Some people have used cultural and ethical diversity among different communities with different people and have come to

the conclusion that there is no single ethical truth. To explain this issue, it should be noted that first of all, the difference between ethical rules does not require all the rules to be equally justified. Secondly, there is no reasonable relation between people's belief and what which is real. Different beliefs arise from different approaches of individuals to the truth and generally from the worldviews of individuals or different communities and not from difference in the fundamental principles where the individuals look at the truth from their own views.

2) Mind-orientation or mentality of ethical values means that there is no good or evil at all and we ourselves create ethical values and principles. For example, Gergias believes that nothing exists except me (of course, his goal is his personal and individual truth and not a kind of human), "Therefore, if I exist, other creatures like animals and plants are made by my mind. In fact, world is defined by me and my mentalities." In criticizing Gregias's viewpoint, it has been said that he has considered no difference between existence, creature and nothing. On the other hand, if he assumes existence for nothing, it will not be nothing anymore. Furthermore, the sentence "Nothing is nothing" provides us with no news. For the viewpoint of relativists indicating the mentality of values, it is notable to refer to Allameh's criticism: He believes that man has two characteristics. Some of them are related to the kind of man and some to the human himself. Typical characteristic is relates to human and is necessary for all humans as it is perpetual. Consequently, the judgments related to typical characteristic are necessary, permanent and general. Man validates some obligations to remove these needs which are requirements of mankind. These credit obligations stand between man's weakness which is a reality and perfectness for which man is created. Therefore, these accredited issues are rooted in a real subject and are stable. For example, when man gets hungry, first of all, he finds the real relation between eating and fullness and then, he creates a necessary relation between himself and eating, which is a possible relation (i.e., he can either eat or remains hungry). Of course, this is followed by advantages and disadvantages because according to Allameh, when man finds that some issues have advantages and some other have disadvantages, he gives credits to them and since he finds that such credits may sometimes cause no encouragement and movement, he establishes admiration and rejection and considers admiration as a supplementary to necessity and rejection as supplementary to refusal. Therefore, obligations are not absolute, but, they are based on reality and may be studied due to such realities.

Moreover, advantages and disadvantages are credit and based on reality like obligations. Since some of the acts are similar in their appearance such as

marriage and adultery, true and false statements, etc. However, one of them is associated with good and the other with evil; and this shows their accredited nature.

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