



Moral Relativism Reconsidered

“Moral relativism” is an ambiguous concept; this is the first thing of which to take note. The second is that in spite of the ease and frequency with which it springs from people’s lips, very few people are comfortable identifying themselves as proponents of any doctrine so called.

The standard textbook treatment of “moral relativism” identifies three distinct theories with it: ethical subjectivism, conventionalism, and historical relativism.

Ethical subjectivism is the doctrine that the validity of moral judgments is determined by or relative to the individual or *subject*. So, although the respective positions of two people over, say, the moral standing of abortion, are mutually incompatible — one person claims that it is immoral while the other denies this — neither can be said to be more or less correct than the other, for both points of view are equally legitimate.



Conventionalism is the position that the validity of moral determinations is relative to, not the individual subject, but the conventions of *the culture* from within the framework of which they are made. If, then, two contemporary cultures like, say, the West and Islam, advance mutually incompatible views on, for example, the proper treatment of women, it is inappropriate to conclude from this that one view is any better or worse than the other in any categorical sense, for both views are fine and good *relative to their own standards*.

Historical relativism, though similar to conventionalism, isn’t quite the same thing. The historical relativist insists that the validity of moral judgments is relative to *time*. What this implies is that even though Americans in the 21st century need not be persuaded that slavery is morally contemptible while our ancestors — including some Americans — thought otherwise, neither generation is more or less enlightened than the other on this (or any other) issue, for every generation judges and should be judged by its own standards.

Their differences aside, common to these versions of relativism is a rejection of the proposition that there are moral truths that transcend considerations of place and time, truths whose jurisdiction extends over *all* people.

It is my settled judgment that in spite of the clumsiness with which *some* leftists speak, the leftist is decidedly, emphatically, *not* a moral relativist.

If the notion that there are *any* human beings who have somehow or other succeeded in freeing themselves entirely from all moral concerns is inconceivable, how much more so must we find the



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conventional right-wing wisdom that expects us to accept that countless millions of our moralistic brethren on the Left don't "care for" or "believe in" morality. As one conservative writer once said, morality is like the air we breathe. Everyone — including the most narcissistic among us — makes moral judgments.

From the time of his emergence as an identifiable character, the leftist has been distinguished by his obsession with ameliorating or even eliminating material inequalities. As many thinkers on the Right, from Ludwig von Mises to Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman to Thomas Sowell, have long observed, this obsession finds expression in a moral vision notable for its robustness. As the title of Sowell's exposition of standard leftist morality — *The Quest for Cosmic Justice* — makes abundantly clear, the leftist holds as robust, comprehensive, grandiose, and, well, ambitious a morality as any that we will find.

The French Revolutionaries were, quite literally, the original leftists, and it was in response to the Revolution that conservatism as a distinctive intellectual tradition emerged via Edmund Burke. Yet far from accusing his opponents of denying the objectivity of morality or anything of the kind, Burke rather chided them for their moral *absolutism*! "The Rights," not of Englishmen or Frenchmen, but of Man belonged to a metaphysics that Burke eschewed for both its abstractness and its *unconditional* character.

Of these radicals, Burke writes:

Whilst they are possessed by these notions, it is vain to talk to them of the practice of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country, the fixed form of a Constitution whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience.... They ... have wrought under ground a mine that will blow up, at one grand explosion, all examples of antiquity, all precedents, charters, and acts of Parliament.

The French Revolutionaries have "'the rights of man.' Against these there can be no prescription; against these no argument is binding: these admit no temperament and no compromise: anything withheld from their full demand is so much of fraud and injustice."

As an antidote to this trans-historical morality, Burke advanced a morality centered in the local and the particular — i.e. in *tradition*. And in so doing, he set a precedent that conservatives — and most *rightists* — have followed ever since.

Yet there are even more obvious considerations that put the lie to the idea that leftists are moral relativists. While he may attempt to dismiss *his opponent's* morality by accounting for it in exclusively psychological, cultural, or historical terms, the leftist most certainly does not regard *his* morality along these lines. Anyone with any doubts on this score only need ask themselves: Would a leftist suggest that his preference for equality is no better or worse than another's preference for inequality? Is it fathomable that the leftist would ever say something like: "Hey, racism may be immoral for *us* but that doesn't mean that it has to be immoral for *others*"?

These questions are rhetorical. "Racism," "sexism," "homophobia," and, in short, every other evil that constitutes the galaxy of Politically Correct sins the leftist treats as *categorically* immoral.

But, one may object, that the leftist isn't consistent in applying his moral standards, that, say, he tolerates black-on-white "racism" while forbidding white-on-black "racism" proves that my assessment fails and he is, after all, the relativist that his rivals say he is.



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Interestingly, the reasoning of this criticism is exactly the same reasoning upon which the case for moral relativism relies! The conclusion that moral judgments are always relative is typically rooted in the observation that people and whole cultures apply, or at least appear to apply, different moral standards to morally comparable situations. Similarly, the conclusion that the leftist is a relativist is here inferred from the premise that he applies, or at least appears to apply, different moral standards to morally comparable situations. However, neither of these two arguments works.

For one, if the leftist is a moral relativist for acting inconsistently, then we are all relativists, for there is no one among us who is immune to the charge of inconsistency. The leftist may be inadvertently inconsistent, hypocritical, unwise, or cowardly. Yet from the selectivity with which he extends his principles we are not justified in concluding that he is a relativist.

Secondly, even when he is aware of this charge, the leftist is ready to meet it. Sticking with the forgoing example, he has been laboring inexhaustibly for decades trying to convince us — and himself, doubtless — that in spite of surface appearances, the hostility that blacks have shown against whites, like the preferential treatment policies — “affirmative action” — that discriminate in favor of blacks and against whites, are not instances of “racism.” Blacks, by virtue of their unique history of “oppression” in America, the leftist tells, are *justifiably* hostile toward whites and are *owed* “special consideration.”

No, the leftist is no moral relativist. Quite the contrary: he is a moral *absolutist*.



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