

## *Study Guide: Moral Realism & Relativism*

### **Definitions of Terms:**

Moral Realism (also known as Moral Objectivism): The view that there are objective moral facts. It follows from this that ethics is somewhat like science: It's task is to *discover* (not decide) what these moral facts are.

Absolutism: A form of moral realism which states that there is at least one moral rule or principle that is absolute (that is, there are no exceptions to it; it must be followed in all cases, no matter what).

Absolute: A moral rule or principle is said to be absolute when it cannot be overridden by any other moral considerations. It must be followed in all cases, no matter what.

Defeasible: A moral rule or principle is said to be defeasible when it could (at least in some circumstances) be overridden by other moral considerations. E.g., The moral rule that prohibits killing other human beings is defeasible if there are circumstances in which it is overridden by other considerations. Killing in self defense may be an example of such a case.

Moral Relativism: The view that there are NO objective moral facts. There is no objective reason for preferring one set of moral standards to any other set.

### **Arguments for Moral Relativism:**

#### The Argument from Disagreement:

1. We have many unresolved moral disagreements.
2. If there were objective moral facts that would settle these disagreements, we would have found them by now.
- ∴ 3. There are no objective moral facts.
- ∴ 4. Moral realism is false and moral relativism is true.

#### Problems:

- A. No compelling reason is given for treating our moral and non-moral disagreements differently. When we have disagreements over non-moral issues, we generally assume that there is a correct answer (even if we are not sure what that answer is). Why not make the same assumption for moral arguments?
- B. Our methods for dealing with our moral disagreements are often unlikely to be productive. Therefore, our failure to arrive at moral agreements may result from our faulty methods, rather than from the absence of objective moral facts.

#### The Argument from Respect:

1. We have a moral obligation to be respectful of other cultures, points of view, ways of living, etc.
2. Saying that a culture (or whatever) is morally impermissible is not properly respectful.
3. Moral realism accuses some cultures, etc. of being morally impermissible.
4. Moral relativism never accuses any culture, etc. of being morally impermissible.
- ∴ 5. Moral relativism fulfills its moral obligation to be respectful, but moral realism does not.

∴ 6. Moral relativism is correct, and moral realism is mistaken.

Problems:

- A. This is an argument for moral relativism, but a relativist would have to say that premise 1 is false. Premise 1 presents us with an objective moral standard, and relativism says that there aren't any. Only a realist could claim that premise 1 is true.
- B. If we think there really is a moral obligation to be respectful of other cultures, points of view, etc., then this suggests that moral realism (NOT relativism) is true. Moral relativism would say that although you may decide to be respectful of others, you don't have to. The relativists are committed to saying that there is nothing objectively wrong with deciding to treat everyone else with disrespect.

Implications of Moral Relativism:

1. There is nothing about actions themselves that is relevant to their moral status. E.g., There is no objective reason for preferring kindness to hatred. But this seems very implausible.
2. It is impossible for a culture (or an individual, community, etc.) to improve or decline morally. Improvement and decline both work on the assumption that there is some objective set of moral standards, and relativism denies this. Again, this is implausible.
3. Moral reformers are automatically wrong (with regard to the standards of the community they are trying to reform). No matter what arguments the reformer presents, there could never be any objective reason for the community to change.
4. Moral relativism offers no moral guidance. It merely tells us that any particular action would be approved by one group, but denounced by another. But the whole point of doing ethics is to find guidance.