Ethical relativism vs absolutism: research implications

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Abstract

Purpose – The constructs of relativism and absolutism have a significant role to play in the development of ethical theory; however, they are commonly simplified in their depictions and are philosophically more complex than we give them credit for. The purpose of this paper is to undertake an in-depth examination of ethical relativity and ethical absolutism before concluding with a discussion of which research implications warrant further investigation.

Design/methodology/approach – A descriptive, historical, anthological approach has been taken.

Findings – Ethical relativism is regrettably subject to a proliferation of related terminology and, in many instances with different meanings ascribed to similar terms. In addition, ethical relativity appears to attract different research perspectives that are heavily dependent on their academic origins. A clear distinction needs to be made between ethical and situational relativity. It is suggested that relativism is present in the process of moral justification and that ethical relativism should be analyzed from three levels: the individual level, the role and group level, and the cultural levels. The over-riding objection to ethical relativism rests on the consequences of accepting relativism, which undermines the existence and strength of global moral standards and the inherent positioning of ethical absolutism. Absolutism does not deny the existence of multiple moral practices evident around the world, but proposes that variations in ethical actions could still be rooted in common universal moral standards based on our requirements as human beings and the necessities of long-term survival.

Research limitations/implications – The ensuing discussions of relativism and absolutism open up a rich vein of research opportunities and suggest caution is required in regard to research methodologies. From a methodological perspective, care needs to be taken. For example, using hypothetical ethical dilemmas that are often unrelated to a specific industry or cultural setting has resulted in many researchers observing situational relativity rather than true ethical relativity.

Originality/value – This paper specifically examines whether there are differences in underlying and basic moral standards even though similarities in ethical behaviour have been determined, or whether differing ethical actions could, as the absolutists believe, originate from common universal standards despite apparent differences in perceptions and actions across cultures.

Introduction

What morality ordains in one place or age may be quite different from what morality ordains in another place or age. The moral code of Chinamen is quite different from that of Europeans, that of African Savages quite
different from both. Any morality, therefore, is relative to the age, place, and the circumstances in which it is found. It is in no sense absolute (Stace, 1965, p. 27).

This historical statement in today's context appears both racist and inappropriate and in a delightfully subtle way highlights the essential thesis of the theory of ethical relativism while also alluding to what is commonly considered the antithetical theory of ethical absolutism. At the core of ethical relativity is the question, “Do moral principles apply universally, or are all values and ethical judgements relative to their context, particularly time and cultural contexts?”

The constructs of relativism and absolutism have a significant role to play in the development of ethical theory. For example, it has been suggested that an individual's ethical ideology can greatly assist in explaining differences in moral judgement (Forsyth, 1980, 1992; Forsyth et al., 1988; Forsyth and Nye, 1990; Barnett et al., 1996, 1998), with idealist individuals maintaining the absolutism of a moral standard in contrast to relativists who shy away from the proposition of universal moral rules. The ethical ideologies of senior Australian managers indicated a negative relationship between relativism and corporate ethical values (Fernando et al., 2008), while consumers who scored higher on idealism and lower on relativism were more likely to reject questionable activities (Swaidan et al., 2004). Providing a more generalist conclusion, Forsyth and Berger (1982) have suggested that variations in ethical ideology may predict individual differences in moral judgement but not necessarily moral behaviour.

A strong positive relationship has, however, been found between religiosity and idealism, with idealism providing a good predictor of ethical intentions and behaviours (Oumlil and Balloun, 2009). Also examining idealism and relativism, Bierly et al. (2009) found a positive relationship between creativity and relativism. It appears that creative people are less likely than non-creative people to follow universal rules in their moral decision making. Similarly, a positive relationship was also found between creativity and idealism indicating that highly creative people are more likely to be “situationists”.

Intriguingly, age appears to be an unreliable indicator, with one study finding age a major determinant of relativism with older people revealing themselves as significantly more relativistic than younger people (Marques and Azevedo-Pereira, 2009). In contrast, Kim and Choi (2003) found in their study that older respondents showed high idealism and low relativism and a higher agreement with professional ethics.

The discussion of relativism and absolutism begs investigation from a cross-cultural perspective and, in a comprehensive study examining 29 countries, Forsyth et al. (2008) reported that levels of idealism and relativism vary across regions of the world in predictable ways, and that a nation's ethics position predicted that country's location on previously documented cultural dimensions. Even more recently in a study contrasting US and Moroccan business managers, significant differences in idealism and relativism were found between the two countries. Moroccan managers tended to be more idealistic than the US managers (Oumlil and Balloun, 2009).

The importance of these constructs should not be overlooked; however, they are philosophically more complex than we give them credit for. It is, therefore, appropriate to
undertake a more in-depth examination of ethical relativity and ethical absolutism before concluding with a discussion of which research implications would warrant further investigation.

**Ethical relativity**

Ethical relativity does not simply highlight the fact that different people have different sets of moral ideas. The theory goes further and asserts that these differences may be significant, as the very same action that is right in one country or period could be wrong in another. The advocates of ethical relativism are adamant that moral standards differ between groups, within a single culture, between cultures, and across time. They also believe that the ethical systems of belief supporting those moral standards of behaviour will differ according to the time and circumstance as will ethical behaviour. Which set of beliefs is rightful or correct is difficult to determine but all holders of those beliefs will assert that their system is correct.

Not only is ethical relativism concerned with the premise that different moral standards and ethical beliefs exist, ethical relativism also questions whether there is any commonality that may over-ride those differences:

In the mixed chorus of competing moral standards and diverse ethical systems, can we discern any single principle that unifies them all, or are we left with the weak and unsatisfactory conclusion that all ethical systems are equally valid, and that a person’s choice has to be relative to his or her upbringing or education or position or country or culture? (Hosmer, 1987, p. 93).

The theory of ethical relativism is motivated by the recognition of historical, cultural and individual diversity and the principal supporters are those who have identified significant variations in moral customs around the world and in different social settings. Relativism asserts that there is no consistency of moral beliefs because moral principles are relative to individual persons and, consequently, there are no absolute or universal moral standards. Proponents of relativism add that the concept of rightness depends on individual or cultural beliefs and that the “rightness” and “wrongness” are meaningless notions if they are isolated from the specific context within which they have arisen. Therefore, the act of killing defective newborn babies in an under-developed and impoverished nation would supposedly carry a different moral weight given the context in which the circumstance has arisen. A more common example, and an ethical dilemma pertinent to the international business environment and the operational concerns of multi-nationals, is the practice of bribery, i.e. payments to individuals, institutions or, possibly, political parties who can ameliorate decisions relevant to the sponsoring company. Euphemistic terms such as “lubricant money” and “facilitation payments” are used to describe bribery payments and managers are frequently given practical advice, such as the following, that clearly supports the notion of ethical relativism:

While illegal everywhere, bribery is widely practised in some countries and thought necessary for successful financial performance. The basic rule to follow is the ancient adage of, “When in Rome, do what the Romans do” (Johnson, 1985, p. 448).

Organisations who resent government intervention, as in the form of the American Foreign Corruption Practices Act, are quick to adhere to the relativist view with statements such as,
“morality only exists within culture and it is not for us to say what is moral in someone else’s culture” (Kobrin, 1976, p. 105). Indignant American individuals and organisations who have been charged as a result of legislation that prohibits any payment overseas that could be easily construed as bribery, have criticised the legislative and judicial system for being ignorant of the concept of ethical relativism.

It is, however, imperative that ethical relativism is not mistaken for the adage, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”. This can be confusing and it disguises apparent relativism from real relativism. Managers who adopt the “When in Rome” premise, run the risk of adopting actions that are seen as commonly accepted (apparent relativism) when it is not actually the case (real relativism). With international business practices, and the requirements of “Rome” (e.g. bribery payments), managers may be slipping on the cloak of “moral neutralism” where it looks as though bribery is commonly accepted when, in reality, it is not actually or openly condoned. Alternatively, real relativism would truly embrace a practice that is accepted by everyone. In many instances, one must admit that under-the-table payments are not acceptable for the simple reason that, for the most part, they are hidden under the table. “If bribes were truly proper, they would be above the table instead of below it” (Johnson, 1985, p. 448). Although cultural differences do exist, outright bribery is, generally, not openly condoned (Longenecker et al., 1988, p. 345). Real relativism in a cultural context will exist only when the behaviour is thoroughly and openly accepted by everyone in that culture. The prevailing unethical practices that are in existence, but are not commonly accepted, do not constitute common morality.

In business, ethical relativism often develops into conventional morality and unethical actions are often justified on the “commonly accepted practice” argument (Miesing and Preble, 1985). Some observers of international business have been critical of instances where ethical relativism has been used as a form of “moral sanctuary”. For example, business people may have undertaken an act which ordinarily would be called wrong but have claimed that the act is right, or justified, because it falls under a special set of codes or moral standards advocated by the social group or institution in which they are operating (Konrad, 1982). In response to this view, which essentially supports the assertion that certain actions are immune from ordinary moral criticisms because they derive from a special set of codes or principles that supersede ordinary rules, Roberts (1986) has stated that, given the complexities of international business, there is some justification for business people claiming relief from moral criticism by shielding behind arguments of ethical relativity, especially given their need to accommodate differing cultural circumstances. To be expected, this view is contentious.

**Situational relativity**

Ethical relativity should be distinguished from situational relativity or, as it has been more commonly referred to, “situational ethics”, which completely ignores the presence of a moral standard as a guide to decision making. With ethical relativity, the existence of moral standards is recognised and although these standards may vary considerably across circumstances, moral standards are still available and are used for reference. Alternatively, in situational relativity, there are no moral standards and one would relate any given decision about right and wrong to the specific situation at hand. Situational ethics is,
therefore, a form of pragmatism that states, “If it works, it's OK”, thus, the circumstance alters not only the case but also the rules (Berkman, 1977). In situational ethics, the end justifies the means so long as the situation is evaluated by the ultimate good achieved. There are no rules or social sanctions, instead individuals have the freedom to be personally responsible for the specifics of the situation (Miesing and Preble, 1985).

The distinction between ethical and situational relativity is relevant to the interpretation of ethical research, where respondents are commonly presented with hypothetical ethical dilemmas that are often unrelated to a specific industry or cultural setting. Upon soliciting replies related to likely ethical or unethical behaviour, what many researchers may be observing with these ambiguous and independent ethical dilemmas is situational relativity rather than true ethical relativity (e.g. De George, 1989).

In its simplest form, ethical relativism advances the existence of the variability of moral judgements across individual, group, role or cultural contexts. The ethical relativist asserts that there is not merely one moral law, code or standard but many moral laws, codes and standards that differ through the dimensions of time, place and individuals. It has, therefore, been proposed that:

[...] any ethical position that denies that there is a single moral standard which is equally applicable to all men at all times may fairly be called a species of ethical relativity (Stace, 1965, p. 27).

Beauchamp and Bowie (1988) have appropriately identified one of the most confusing dimensions of relativism which suggests that more subtle relativism could be present in the process of moral justification. While, superficially, moral practices may appear similar across individuals, organisations and cultures, the reasoning and the moral standard(s) behind the practices could differ dramatically. For example, equal pay issues could be justified on the basis of equity or fairness in a culture; whereas, self-protection against the influence of organised labour could be an alternative justification for the presence of the same moral state. Consequently, ethical actions appear similar but the justification and reasoning processes are different. It can be noted that the investigative research undertaken to date in connection with ethical relativity has dealt with the obvious moral distinctions and differences in ethical behaviour, rather than the more difficult area of moral justification or reasoning inherent in the ethical decision-making process. It is, therefore, essential that researchers examine not just apparent differences in ethical perceptions across cultures, but also any differences in the reasoning process.

Ethical relativism is, regrettably, subject to a proliferation of related terminology and in many instances different meanings are ascribed to similar terms. In addition, ethical relativity appears to attract different research perspectives that are heavily dependent on their academic origins. For example, the socio-cultural ethical relativist appears more concerned with the problem of values, and the validity of relativism to societies and culture, than with individual relativism. Social anthropologists are frequently described as cultural relativists and are concerned with the descriptive meaning of relativity; whereas, evaluative relativists are more concerned with the in-depth appraisal of ethical perceptions (Moser, 1968, p. 7).
To provide a logical expansion of the theory of ethical relativism, three levels upon which the concept can be analyzed have been identified:

1. the individual level;
2. the role and group level; and
3. the more commonly discussed, cultural level (Gifford, 1983).

**Individual/naive relativism**

Individual relativism advances that each person possesses the standard(s) by which his or her actions are judged. Individual, or naïve, relativism is based on the notion that moral decisions are deeply personal, highly complex and we are subjectively responsible for them (Freeman and Gilbert, 1988, p. 26). Consequently, one should not expect any commonality of standards that are used to evaluate moral decisions. The naïve relativist asserts that we must allow each person to interpret the situation and act on his or her own moral belief. For each individual, what is thought to be moral or right is, in fact, what is right because, for each individual, their perception of moral correctness is based upon their moral standards. One should not, therefore, expect consistency across individual judgements, because each person will possess their own standards of what is right to match what they think is right.

The likelihood of individual interpretative standards is supported by the notion that although there is an enormous influence from intellectual considerations, it is thought that moral judgements are not arrived at through the cognitions but are based upon moral emotions. This emotional origin of moral judgements consistently denies the objective validity ascribed to them by common sense and by many normative theories of ethics (Westermarck, 1932). As we are in possession of our own personalised moral standards, and as the sole judge of our ethical actions, we may, therefore, be following the directives of our emotions, our faith, possibly a belief in God, or simply the dictates of our conscience. According to this view, we do not appear to be engaging in any reasoning as to the appropriateness of these individualised standards.

Naive relativism has been criticised for inhibiting critical evaluation of the appropriateness of one’s moral standards and for perpetuating a somnolent tolerance for moral standards that might have negative consequences. Naive relativism has also been criticised as being the “lazy way out” for, without critical evaluation or reflection, one could question how an individual is to facilitate comparison and enhancement of his or her moral standards. Naive relativism is also seen to take tolerance to the extreme and proposes that we be tolerant of all people regardless of how their actions might affect us. Their standards may, in fact, be ill conceived but, for the naïve relativist to test whether or not an action is morally correct, would only involve questioning whether or not the individual believes the standard to be correct:

The relativist is content to focus on the fact of belief rather than on the context of the belief [...] this self-deceiving stance means that we have no way of judging the adequacy of those beliefs (Freeman and Gilbert, 1988, p. 28).

and, therefore, no way of improving our moral standards.
What about the influence of religion and commonality of moral standards? The existence of a common religious faith and what could be perceived as commonality in moral standards across various individuals within a religious sub-group does not undermine ethical relativism. It is felt that while some moral standards could be held consistently by Christians, Buddhists or Atheistic thinkers, possibly, not all their moral standards are identical and their value judgements and behaviour could be incompatible with others in their own sub-group (Moser, 1968, p. 175).

**Role/group relativism**

Since individuals within society are assigned one or more roles, morality and moral reasoning become a matter of properly defining these roles and the obligations attached to them. The moral referent is derived from the individual's roles and/or social group. Social group relativism could easily be referred to as organisational or industry relativism and this concept is particularly relevant to the ancillary concepts of organisational and industrial norms. A group in this context could refer to a social group, department, organisation or possibly an industry. The evaluative criteria are no longer solely the individual standards possessed by the individual but the role and group expectations that are, in turn, determined by both formal and informal power relationships. Moral standards are, therefore, not individually determined but are those prescribed by one's role and group membership. For the group, the moral standard or standards are collectively established and, for each group, what is judged to be a correct moral action is based upon the standards that have been set by the group even though these standards may differ across groups. The requirements of the role/group may bring divergent moral standards with personal or individual moral standards but, according to the relativist view, the individual has a responsibility to the moral standards associated with their role/group and not their emotions or conscience. To contrast individual relativism to role relativism, your criminal defence lawyer may personally think you are guilty and should not be defended, but his job requires that he act in accordance with his role and the dictates of his professional group.

The identification or creation of a moral standard for a specific social group is, in reality, possible. It is the underlying intent of managerial ideologies and ethical codes of conduct although, regrettably, ethical codes are frequently viewed as a mechanism for *post hoc* rationalisation of decisions (Donaldson and Walker, 1980). In relation to social group relativism, the common practice of the group becomes the sole benchmark of acceptable behaviour although we are rarely conscious of who set the benchmark or even when exactly the benchmark of acceptable behaviour has shifted. Consider, for example, what are deemed to be acceptable gift-giving practices and how they vary not only by position but by industry, and how these practices have changed over the last decade.

When adhering to one's role or group standards, in contrast to personal moral standards, it has been suggested that not only may this lead to extensive psychological conflict, but individuals may use their role/group standards as a shield to avoid full consideration of the moral dimensions of the circumstances, or the assignment of responsibility for their actions. Following the historical revelations of public atrocities, particularly during World War II, society does appear to have become less accepting of the loyal agent argument, “I was just doing my duty”, as a complete justification for immoral action.
Role/group relativity is not without criticism. Role/group relativism, as with individual relativism, appears to provide little opportunity for critical evaluation and revision of existing standards relevant to the role circumstance. In addition, role/group relativity does not resolve what would happen when there is role/group conflict, that is, where the decision maker is in possession of two or more roles with conflicting expectations and moral standards. In a pragmatic sense, morality is simply a matter of following, without question, the role/group norms that are seen as accepted practice. This form of relativism is ubiquitous in the business environment and statements such as, “We do it because everybody else does it”, or, “It’s OK, it’s acceptable practice in this industry”, are heard all too frequently.

A difficulty that arises with role/group relativism is that most decision makers belong to a diversity of social groups, i.e. functional departments, organisations, trade associations, etc. each with a variety of potentially conflicting social norms. If social group relativism is correct, there is no way to decide which norms rule the day. Also, given the sheer complexity of business situations and the presence of differing circumstances and conditions, social group relativity does not indicate that one answer to a moral question is any better than another. Each social group will consider their decision, made in the light of their moral standards, as correct and without any interest in comparing it across different social groups. Consequently, there is no attempt to critically evaluate the norms in use, or to develop or set new norms. With social group relativism, there is a heavy reliance on the notion of accepted practice, which, in effect, endorses the status quo and tacitly condones what could be unethical industrial practices. Social group relativism in this context could not only be viewed as a guide for moral behaviour but also an excuse or justification for existing action without consideration of comparative evaluation and improvement.

If ethical questions in business ethics consist largely of the dilemmas that individuals experience through their organisational roles and group attachments, then perhaps role/group relativity is the area of ethical relativity that should receive greater deliberation. Specifically, attention needs to be given to determining the moral standards in use in various organisational roles, which conflict resolution techniques are used by managers when these standards conflict with their personal moral standards, and how one can stimulate the needed critique and revision of these established role standards.

**Cultural relativism**

Of particular relevance to this thesis is the cultural dimension of relativism. Cultural relativists claim there are no ultimate universal ethical principles and that all value judgements are relative to particular cultural contexts. The cultural relativist not only refers to cross-cultural differences in moral standards but also the way in which people reason about morality. Cultural relativists assert that moral judgements are grounded in deeply held cultural values that have withstood the test of time and are in the nature of basic beliefs as to what human welfare is all about.

Given the differences between cultures, cultural values and influences on behavioural expectations of members, it is not surprising that ethical relativists strongly support the view that what constitutes ethical behaviour will differ substantially across cultures in what
Sumner (1907) has called “folkways”. These refer to the “right way” of action or behaviour, the way the ancestors used which has been handed down by tradition. This is not to say that folkways cannot change. It is imperative to realise that if life conditions change then new philosophies and ethical rules are created to justify the new ways. So, if existing mores do not work it may raise doubts about whether folkways are becoming eroded, and whether the regulative element in the mores has begun to lose authority and, consequently, the folkways will need to be adjusted.

If cultural relativism is explicitly affirmed by anthropologists and those studying cultures as being a factual hypothesis, then morality will be relative to a particular culture, society or community. There would be no one standard for judging the morality of the particular culture. The best one can do is to understand the mores or moral codes of a given society but we are unable to judge among differing societies (Freeman and Gilbert, 1988, p. 35). Consequently, no comparative judgements are permissible because there is no commonality. When one subscribes to the relativists’ view there is no one universal “ought”, as in “you ought to do this”, and no value judgements can be derived, for to do so would be to attempt to derive an “ought” from an “is” (Schmidt, 1955, p. 781).

When viewing potentially unethical activities, Brandt (1959) has referred to the “ultimate” ethical disagreement that occurs when two cultures are able to consider the same set of facts surrounding a moral issue while disagreeing on the moral issue itself. Consider, for example, a high-level company appointment where one applicant is a known relative of the chairman. While the same factual evidence may exist, one culture group, may not consider the situation involves an ethical issue while others may identify a clear case of potential nepotism. In a similar example, Asian managers may also be ignorant of the ethical issue of conflicting interests when allocating contracts to personal friends. The ultimate ethical disagreement, once again, occurs when two cultures are able to consider the same set of facts surrounding a moral issue while disagreeing on the moral issue itself. This fundamental disparity, and the general lack of knowledge as to what factual circumstances are, or are not, perceived as moral issues, and in what culture, is a major impetus for undertaking cross-cultural ethical research.

The implications of cultural relativism for the business community are vast given that today more and more corporations are operating in the international market place:

Managers face a diversity of cultural norms, from different table manners to different practices with respect to abortion and infanticide. Cultural relativism is the single most important ethical issue for businesses operating in a global market (Freeman and Gilbert, 1988, p. 36).

This view clearly supports ethical relativity and it can be noted that while texts on international management abound with technicalities relating to differences in legal systems or appropriate methods of distribution, there is a notable absence of discussion on the operational implications of cultural relativism, and the difficulties of reconciling different ethical codes in host countries. Cross-cultural comparisons of managerial ethical attitudes appear to have only alerted multi-national corporations to the fact that more attention must be given to orienting new managers to differing values in foreign countries, as well as the policies appropriate to the facilities in those countries (Becker and Fritzsche, 1987a, p. 95).
It has been suggested that many business people simplify the issue of ethical relativity by over-estimating differences in basic moral standards from country to country, and that the business community is apt to interpret ethical relativity as a simple case of “our ethics versus their ethics” (Longenecker et al., 1988, p. 345). This leaves the manager with a dichotomous decision as to which ethical standard to adopt, if any, and in what circumstance. In contrast, for those managers who are tempted not to recognise the existence of differing ethical standards across cultures, cultural relativism is a warning against moral imperialism and the imposing of one's morality on others. That is, if differing standards are recognised, cultural relativism also restricts managers from judging other cultural practices by standards they do not accept.

In reality, cultural relativism poses a substantial challenge to our view that we must continually search for new moral principles. In other words, if cultural relativism is true, the search for improved ethics is over; one merely obeys the local customs, codes and laws of the country in which one operates. However, whose norms should prevail; who decides? Regrettably, in many instances, the prevailing norms simply favour the group in power and are not necessarily heartfelt by all those in that culture, e.g. apartheid. Ethical relativism promotes a growing acceptance of ethical divergence and a reluctance to seek means of resolving those conflicts.

A further criticism of cultural relativism is that it undermines the existence and strength of global moral standards. Therefore, when dealing with ethical questions, we are led to believe that we are unable to decide, or even judge, matters of right and wrong, or good and evil, because morality is always relative to a variable person, social or cultural standard.

**Ethical absolutism**

But what if a global standard did exist? What if there were common values and a common moral standard upon which ethical reasoning rested? At the heart of the theory of ethical relativity is the contrasting and often fervently articulated theory of ethical absolutism. The theoretical distinctions between these theories have in the past attracted a great deal of attention and, in discussing absolutism and relativism, Moser has lamented, “There is hardly another field of inquiry to be found in which vagueness and ambiguity and, consequently, talking at cross-purposes is more prevalent than in this subject” (Moser, 1968, p. 4).

Despite the inherent ambiguity of ethical absolutism, cross-cultural ethical research has provided some research support for it. Comparisons of the ethical beliefs of American and Israeli business managers (Izraeli, 1988), Greek and American business students (Tsalikis and Nwachukwu, 1988), South African and Australian managers (Abratt et al., 1992) all found that, despite differences in socio-cultural and political factors, ethical beliefs based on moral standards varied little from culture to culture. This commonality of ethical beliefs hints at the possibility of common moral standards and supports the notion of absolutism.

An important point to consider at this juncture is that one should not negate the existence of multiple moral standards actually in use, and employed around the world, but recognise that despite these variables all ethical standards and actions could be rooted in a common
universal moral standard. This common universal moral standard, or standards, are based on our requirements as human beings and the necessities of long-term survival.

Harmon (1984, p. 370) has defined moral absolutism to be a view about the moral reasons people have to do things and to want or hope for [...] things that everyone has a reason to hope or wish for. It appears that these “things” are common in all individuals and all cultures. According to moral absolutism, there is a single moral law that applies to everyone which is derived from common needs and reasoning. In other words, there are moral demands that everyone has sufficient reason to follow and these demands are the source of all moral reasons. Naturally, this view is in contrast to moral relativism, which denies there are universal basic moral demands and states different people are subject to different basic moral demands depending on the social customs, practices, conventions, values and principles they accept (Harmon, 1984, p. 371). Ethical absolutism, which has also been referred to as “universalism”, dictates that an omni-present set of standards should apply universally, being equally valid in all places and times. It is important to realise that whether individuals, organisations or cultures adhere to these universal standards is not at issue. The moral standard(s) may be common but adherence may differ. Hence, we derive “perceived relativity” but, in essence, all behaviour is directed by common moral values that have been deemed, through experience, to be essential for successful continuation. In contrast to the dictums of ethical relativity and in respect to managers, Prasad and Rao (1982, p. 125) have pointed out that certain ethical norms, such as honesty, integrity, self-discipline, loyalty and compassion, are perceived as basic moral standards and are widely proclaimed as part of many civilisations yet adherence to those standards varies greatly.

Ethical absolutism is similar to Confucian ethics in one dimension which holds that interdependent parties must follow predetermined rules of obedience, loyalty, respect and hard work so as to optimise their mutual benefits (Miesing and Preble, 1985, p. 469). Absolutism also directs that behaviour should be evaluated by the same rules regardless of action or consequences. Ethical absolutism is not entirely an antithetical concept to ethical relativism. Essentially, the ethical absolutist considers that what people think is right and varies in different countries and times, and yet, what is right is everywhere and always the same. The ethical absolutist is, therefore, cast in the high-handed role of determining what is actually right, i.e. an absolute view of morality. This essence of superiority is an element that frequently undermines absolutism, for the critic of absolutism has assumed that no one entity, or country, will provide the dominant moral values. The suggestion that there is a superior moral standard provider is, however, incorrect and ignores the subtlety of the essential proposal of absolutism. Rather than an assimilative process occurring, the moral standard(s) is independent, yet concurrently determined by all parties. The apparent consistency and similarities of these moral standards are coincidental.

Absolutists also recognise the fragility of individuals and accept that despite the presence of common moral standards and an indication of what actually is right, what individuals think is right will differ. In reference to the cultural dimension, the ethical absolutists assert that although what people think is right varies in different countries, what actually is right is everywhere and always the same. This God-like view adopted by the ethical absolutists is in contrast to the views of the ethical relativists who deny that there is a single universal moral
standard. Ethical relativists also believe there are only confined ephemeral standards relative to the local circumstance.

In a dismissive tone, and in an argument against ethical relativity, Beauchamp and Bowie (1988) have suggested that individual moral relativity is a misnomer. They suggest that if morality is concerned with culturally determined rights and wrongs, then morality by its very nature does not exist through personal interpretation. An individual’s understanding or personal decision to adhere to, or disregard, the existing moral standards is perfectly acceptable, but this does not change the principle of existing morality and moral standards. Some moral principles may be so institutionalised that they are not subject to personal opinion or modification, e.g. thou shalt not kill. The absolutist, therefore, makes a distinction between what actually is right and what is thought to be right. Alternatively, the relativist rejects this distinction and identifies what is right, or moral, and equates it with what is thought to be moral or right by certain individuals, groups or cultures.

**Contrasting arguments**

As Harmon (1984, p. 364) has stated, the question of whether there is a single true morality is an unresolved issue in moral philosophy:

On the one side are relativists, sceptics, nihilists and non-cognitivists. On the other side are those who believe in absolute values and a moral law that applies to everyone. Strangely, only a few people seem to be undecided. Almost everyone seems to be firmly on one side or the other and almost everyone seems to think his or her side is obviously right and the other side is representing a kind of ridiculous folly.

To summarize, cultural relativism claims that morality is relative to a particular culture, society or community and there is no one standard for judging the morality of individuals, groups or cultures. Relativists also assert that despite an understanding of the mores or moral standards of a given society, we are not able to judge among these codes because what is thought to be right is right by virtue of the moral standard upon which the thoughts rest. A judgement of what is “right” or “wrong” is, therefore, not possible as there is no commonality across standards and the means by which one can assert the ascendancy of one set of standards over another. Ethical relativity does not, however, deny subtle relativity where actions and practices may appear similar except for differing in the moral reasoning and justification processes that support the actions.

While the doctrine of ethical relativism has enjoyed considerable attention, there are a number of arguments that can be advanced against relativity. The over-riding objection to ethical relativism rests on the consequences of accepting relativism. The acceptance and tolerance of existing, and divergent, moral standards can deter serious reflection on and resolution of moral problems. Early resignation and the assigning of significant ethical differences to over-riding divergences in moral standards are intuitively a lot easier to accept. Yet, no attempt has been made to resolve the discrepancies in moral standards across individuals, groups or cultures. The moral contrariety is left to vitiate, which is neither constructive nor contributes to an overall improvement of moral standards. Effectively, moral relativism at the individual level advocates that each individual will do what is perceived as correct for him or her. In doing so, each individual will subscribe to his or her own moral standard although, naturally, each individual will be unable to determine
whether one decision is better than another from a moral point of view because of their differing standards. An individual is, therefore, unable to undertake a comparative analysis, which would be the first step to a reflective and evaluative process that might result in the revision and improvement of ethical standards. Similarly, in an organisational context, if one subscribes to the relativist view one is also circumventing the task of developing and articulating a consistent set of moral principles that could be helpful in formulating and implementing organizational decisions that possess an ethical dimension.

In its extreme, relativism professes that each belief is judged by the moral standards of the time or circumstance:

This is absurd because the claim of uniqueness here carries with it an unwarranted implication of incomparability. Further, the claim that each belief is as good as another is itself a non-realistic claim (Krausz, 1989, p. 2).

Krausz tempers his attack on relativism by stating that other forms of relativism ought not to be dismissed entirely and concedes that relativism could exist at general levels, but that extreme relativism cannot be recognised.

To accommodate the absence of a universal guiding moral code that would facilitate comparisons, ethical relativists attempt to add meaning to their comparisons by using a single standard as the pivotal point for the comparative analysis, the single judgement standard being our own moral codes. If we state that Country A’s moral codes are better than Country B’s, what we actually mean is that they are better according to our standard. This conceited perspective does little more than provide groundless satisfaction for our own moral views, and confuses the essential tenets of ethical relativity. The important question in moral relativism is, apparently, not whether your moral standards are as good as mine; “it is whether your moral standards, that benefit society, are as good as mine that benefit society” (Brandt, 1959). Thus, different moral standards can both be believed to be right, which is not the same as saying that the two different moral standards are right (Hosmer, 1987, p. 95).

With perceived differences in moral standards, ethical absolutism has sometimes been incorrectly used as a means of promoting cultural supremacy. Many larger trading nations could be criticised for attempting to prescribe their own ethical norms to other nations. Cultural relativity has also been used to condone unethical behaviour as a retaliatory justification against what is, essentially, cultural imperialism (particularly by Americans) and the perceived superiority of Western ethical standards (Longenecker et al., 1988).

Krausz has pointed out that relativism is often motivated by the recognition of historical or cultural diversity but that this recognition cannot be equated with relativism (Krausz, 1989, p. 1). Ethical relativity is a view that was undoubtedly more acceptable in the past when cultural groups remained largely isolated. Recently, with the advent of international travel, mass media and multi-national business, one could be critical of viewing cultures as mutually exclusive groups – each with an independent moral standard (Stace, 1965, p. 31). This anachronistic view largely ignores the continual and cross-national socialization process that is occurring both on formal and informal levels. By recognising differences in moral standards across cultures, it is always tempting to facilitate comparisons. However, these
comparisons are frequently made by intuition, with no scientific rigour and with weak methodology. In many instances, relativistic assertions are made from the intuitively appealing recognition of individual and cultural disparities but with little attempt to go further than superficial sociological or anthropological perspectives.

A final criticism of ethical relativism is that the theory rests largely on the negative proposition, i.e. that there is no universal morality. Although empirically difficult to prove, research has shown it is plausible that a universal standard could be determined. This would, thereby, undermine the position of relativism and provide support for ethical absolutism. The relativists assert that the non-existence of any absolute moral standard can be clearly recognised from anthropological and sociological data across cultures. In retaliation, the absolutists maintain that researchers are largely ignorant of what constitutes an absolute or universal standard of moral conduct and that the researchers need to figuratively mount the higher podium in order to gain this appreciation. Stace (1965) has drawn the analogy that the various differences of opinion which men have held about the shape of the earth do not prove that it has no one real shape, neither do the various opinions which they have held about morality prove that there is no one true morality.

Does a universal moral standard, with which ethical absolutists are seeking to validate their views, really exist? To challenge ethical relativity it is argued that there are some values that are seen to be universal, that is, some values apply globally without exception. Admittedly, while there are some common principles across many cultures, for example, “Don't kill innocent people”, this common morality has been established by reason, not necessarily from the origins of human nature and a central moral standard. In defence of their position, ethical relativists asseverate that no one has ever been able to discover upon what foundation an absolute moral law would rest and, more appropriately, from what source would a universally binding code derive its authority. In a practical sense, from where would these commands issue – God, or an established global power? Would this universal moral code be applicable in all cultures and contexts? Berkman (1977) has stated that moral codes embedded in Christianity or Judaism are seen to be inadequate in business because they lack practical relevance. So, where might this universal standard originate? Whose norms are to prevail as the deciding norms, remembering that often the prevailing norms simply favour the group in power and are not necessarily heartfelt by all those in that culture.

A further problem of measurement relates to the commonly accepted tenet that relativism is a collective phenomenon that would be difficult for one person to articulate through their subjective opinion. It is, therefore, inherently difficult to gain objectively accurate measures of what might constitute a universal moral standard. Upon questioning the existence of a universal moral standard, Wong (1984, p. 158) has concluded that when the absolutists assert there is only one valid ideal of the “good” for man, they believe that validity is grounded in determinate features of human nature, such as reason or distinctive human potentials for satisfying activities. In support of moral relativism, Wong goes on to point out that there is no feature in one’s social or cultural environment that eliminates all but one ideal as valid. This is probably because there is no such thing as a fixed human nature, which remains invariant across different social environments. People will attempt to develop themselves in ways that are compatible with the particular structure of social co-operation of the group or society in question.
However, one principle that does seem to exist across all groups and cultures, and forms part of every ethical system, is the belief that members of a group bear some form of responsibility for the well-being of other members of the group, and that co-operation is necessary for survival. For example, common rules, such as those relating to incest, are consistent across all cultures because of the need for the purity of the gene pool and consequential biological survival. The seventeenth century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, also argued that if everyone acted on the basis of his or her self-interest and ignored the well being of others, life would be solitary, nasty, brutish and short. It has even been pointed out that if every individual man and woman put up an irrefutable claim to be judged by no standard except his or her own, the result would be moral chaos and the collapse of all effective standards altogether. As this moral chaos is clearly not the case, one could tacitly assume that an amorphous, yet undefined, moral standard does exist. All cultures appear to understand that standards of behaviour are needed to promote co-operation. These standards could be both positive and negative – positive in that the behaviour is considered appropriate, and negative for behaviour that is considered harmful (Hosmer, 1987).

It has also been suggested that there are emotional, intellectual and biological bases for a common human world view which have been referred to as the “pan-human” elements in culture (Moser, 1968, p. 211), and that if we accept these pan-human universals in regard to human needs and standards, could we not be developing broad universal outlines of morality that transcend cultural differences? Human needs, particularly those of Maslow’s (1954) “Hierarchy of Needs” have also been used to support ethical absolutism by emphasising man’s continuous motivation to pursue dominant higher-order needs of self-actualisation as the more elementary physiological needs are satisfied. It has been suggested that it seems to be in man’s nature to pursue good values, such as “truthfulness, honesty, kindness and love”, thus, the self-actualised man is also morally good and in possession of moral standards that appear universal (Moser, 1968, p. 212). Even in business, multi-national corporations are assuming economic growth is a universal value and should be espoused by every country. One could also argue that individuals, irrespective of culture, are forced to adopt industrial values, attitudes and behaviours such as rationalism, secularism and mechanical time in order to comply with the imperative of industrialisation (Kelly et al., 1987).

It does appear difficult to get away from the notion of basic and common values. Many recognise that there are practical difficulties in specifying ethical principles that may apply universally, but these difficulties do not imply that ethical relativism is correct. Following a book-length discussion of absolutism and relativism in ethics, Moser arrived at the conclusion that socio-cultural ethical relativists do not offer any convincing reasons why valid moral principles should not be universally valid (Moser, 1968, p. 225). Similarly, Beauchamp and Bowie (1988, p. 12) have commented that while many may be sceptical of the existence of a universal moral code, scepticism is not enough to undermine a theory, and alone it does not support relativism. Donaldson (1989, p. 10) has also commented that to defend the legitimacy of ethics for global business it is necessary to challenge realism that denies morality a rightful role in international affairs.

**Research implications**
It has been suggested that world philosophy, life policy rights and morality are all products of a culture’s folkways, and that the morality of a group at any time is the sum of the taboos and prescriptions in the folkways by which right conduct is defined. Consequentially, morals can never be intuitive; they are historical, institutional and empirical (Sumner, 1907, p. 21). The fact that morals are “empirical”, as Sumner states, is encouraging because it establishes the opportunity for research in the form of measurement of moral folkways as well as comparison across cultures, whether for the purpose of validating the ethical relativists' viewpoint, or to identify and determine the possibility of a tentative universal moral standard.

In relation to research which has culture as the focal variable, the cross-cultural studies of moral standards that have been undertaken to test the validity of ethical relativity have been limited by methodological restrictions relating to sample sizes, the number of countries compared and methods of data collection (Tsalikis and Fritzsche, 1989, p. 726). The limited empirical cross-cultural research that has been undertaken specifically in relation to business ethics, has provided some insight with interesting patterns exhibiting both national/cultural idiosyncrasies as well as cross-cultural universals inherent in moral principles (Becker and Fritzsche, 1987b, p. 93).

Specifically, what should be examined in greater detail is:

- whether there are differences in underlying and basic moral standards even though similarities in ethical behaviour are determined (a researcher, therefore, needs to determine the subtle realism of relativism rather than the superficial observances of differences across culture; the more subtle existence of relativism could exist in the process of moral justification where superficially the ethical actions appear similar but may be fuelled by differing moral standards); or
- whether differing ethical actions could, as the absolutists predict, originate from common universal standards despite apparent differences in perceptions and actions across cultures.

Grounding moral judgements in culture opens up additional problems relating to cultural relativism. In an age of multi-national business and the internationalisation of economic activity, which cultural norms predominate? Which moral norms should a business follow, and whose culture is right on each question? Making moral judgements on the basis of certain core values in a culture, provides no guidelines when cultures differ on certain practices. Similarly, defining culture also brings out numerous problems when determining the boundaries of a culture, such as, where one culture ends and another begins. In these instances, it is difficult to determine the core cultural values (Buchholz, 1989, pp. 76-7).

It would also be interesting to consider abandoning national boundaries and, based on empirical research, build up new parameters of moral conduct. Effectively, one would be identifying the universal moral standards appropriate to specific social groupings recognising that these groups may be cross-cultural. For example, are Singaporeans, although predominantly and ethnically Chinese, more likely to be within the ethical loci of occidentals? Or, are Australians, as New Zealanders have always suspected, more like Americans in reference to moral attitudes and behaviour? The development of moral
boundaries, independent of national boundaries, is conceptually easier than determining the *locus* of a particular moral standard. Having identified, through moral mapping, a specific social group, a further problem arises. If we are able to define the exact boundaries of the social group within which a moral standard is operative, we still do not know fully what the actual moral standard is within the group. Admittedly, there are many dimensions that make up a moral standard. Can we expect unity on all concepts and enough unity to determine what the universal standard is?

Without a universal moral code, ethical relativists allege that it is impossible to compare different races, although relativists do generally avoid comparisons of individuals living within the same culture or social group. One could, therefore, question whether it would be acceptable in relativist terms to compare individuals in similar social groups but across cultures, e.g. senior or middle managers of multi-national firms. This question is based upon the general agreement among anthropologists that certain values embodied in institutions are universal, or nearly universal. Whether this is the case across institutions, and in similar institutions across different cultures, is still subject to verification (Moser, 1968, p. 218).

It has been pointed out that all differences in behaviour can possibly be explained in terms of universal values which are pursued under variable or situational constraints. If this is the case, then much ethical theorising is pointless. In support of ethical absolutism, Diamond (1982) has suggested that a strong presumption in favour of universal values can be established by showing that differences in behaviour, previously thought to be explainable only in terms of differences in values, can be explained in terms of differences in constraints. Diamond utilised 11 cases, with differences among racial and religious factors, to support his view. While, intuitively, the existence of ethical differences across cultures sounds correct, given the extent of basic anthropological and sociological differences, it is possible that through globalisation (particularly in the business community), social mores relating to international business practice exhibit few differences across cultures. It is interesting to question whether the expected behaviour, attitudes and core moral standards of those who wish to operate at a particular level, such as the international business arena, must be adapted and modified to accommodate new expectations. This, in turn, promotes an ethical constancy that is homologous to the existence of the absolutist universal moral standard for a select sub-group of international managers.

The question of relativism has vexed anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and philosophers for some time and, given the wide variety of ethical concepts, individual opinions and methodological difficulties abound. The sheer complexity of empirical validation has discouraged most researchers from cross-cultural investigations of ethical behaviour. It is perhaps now time that more research attention is given to this critical question:

Moral theory is incomplete and fallible. There are many times when we get it wrong, are mistaken, need new theories, or are not sure of the judgement in a particular case. We only point out that this is an argument for doing more work rather than giving up (Freeman and Gilbert, 1988, p. 41).

Rather than emphasising divergent perceptions across cultures, managers should also be aware of similarities in perceptions. If common areas of concern can be identified (i.e. business activities deemed unethical to all managers, regardless of cultural context) then
perhaps there is the possibility of creating an awareness of a common ethical ground. Developing ethical parameters from the recognition of similar ethical beliefs creates the potential for replication through the international business community. If, for example, conflict of interest, bribery or employee discrimination are perceived as common areas of ethical concern then, independent of occurrence and cultural divergence, efforts could be initiated to establish international standards of business behaviour. The determination of this common ethical ground would be of considerable value in the area of international business where a set of common expectations could be established to create a “level playing field”. The set of common ethical international standards would act in a similar fashion to the standard set of human rights, creating moral expectations that could be used as ethical guidelines for international business managers. Given existing sensitivity to cultural diversity and recognition of the strength of ethical relativism, it is too easy to shy away from the prospect of ethical commonality. Undoubtedly, this is an area which warrants further investigation.

References


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