

Cultural Relativism vs. Cultural Absolutism

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Abstract: I defend cultural relativism against the following objections: (i) The analogy between motion and morality is flawed. (ii) Cultural relativism has greater potential to be harmful to our daily lives than is cultural absolutism. (iii) We made moral progress when we moved from slavery to equality. (iv) There are some moral principles that are accepted by all cultures around the world. (v) Moral argumentation is impossible within the framework of cultural relativism. (vi) We construct arguments for and against cultures.

Keywords: Cultural Absolutism, Cultural Relativism, Morality, Motion, Ockham's Razor

1. INTRODUCTION

Is morality relative to culture? Are there absolute moral standards? Is the analogy between motion and morality tenable? Which has greater potential to be harmful to our daily lives, cultural relativism or absolutism? Does the movement from slavery to equality undermine cultural relativism and support cultural absolutism? Can there be moral argumentation within the framework of cultural relativism? All cultures around the world make some unanimous moral judgments; does this fact undermine cultural relativism and support cultural absolutism? Can one culture be more correct than another? Cultural relativists and absolutists offer opposing answers to these questions. This paper criticizes cultural absolutism and defends cultural relativism.

This paper unpacks the debate between cultural relativists and absolutists as follows. In Section 2, I explicate cultural relativism and absolutism. In Section 3, I argue that the analogy between morality and motion can be used to explicate what cultural relativism claims. In Section 4, I argue that contrary to what cultural absolutists claim, it is not cultural relativism but rather cultural absolutism that has higher potential to be

harmful to our daily lives. In Section 5, I argue that cultural relativism better explains the movement from slavery to equality than does cultural absolutism. In Section 6, I show that cultural relativism can accommodate the fact that all cultures around the world make some unanimous moral judgments. In Section 7, I establish that moral argumentation is possible within the framework of cultural relativism, contrary to what cultural absolutists maintain. In Section 8, I defend cultural relativism against the objection that we can construct arguments for and against cultures. In sum, cultural relativism is in better standing than moral philosophers tend to think.

2. CULTURAL RELATIVISM VS. CULTURAL ABSOLUTISM

According to cultural relativism, just as motion is relative to reference frame, so morality is relative to culture (Harman, 1996: 11; Park, 2011: *passim*). For example, a car is moving in reference to the ground, but it is at rest in reference to its driver. Analogously, eating meat is moral in reference to the omnivorian culture, but is immoral in reference to the vegetarian culture. Physicists say that there is no absolute space which would entitle us to say whether the car is in absolute motion or at absolute rest, and whether the ground is a more correct reference frame than is the driver; therefore, no physical object is a more correct reference frame than another. Similarly, cultural relativists say that there are no absolute moral standards which we would entitle us to say whether a culture is more correct or incorrect than another; therefore, no culture is more correct or incorrect than another.

One caveat is in order. Cultural relativists do not assert that a moral judgment is both true and false, nor do they assert that an act is both moral and immoral. They rather assert that an action is moral in reference to one culture, but it is immoral in reference to another culture. The same is true of physicists. Physicists do not claim that a car is both in motion and at rest. They rather claim that it is in motion in reference to the ground, but it is at rest in reference to the driver. Therefore, it is wrong for Alvaro to say that cultural relativists “argue (at least Park does) that a moral claim can both be true and false” (Alvaro, 2020: 26). No sensible cultural relativist would explicitly commit a contradiction.

According to cultural absolutism, actions are right or wrong depending on whether they meet absolute moral standards, and absolute moral standards “exist independently of the opinions and preferences of humans” (Alvaro, 2020: 33). Accordingly, an action can be moral even if all humans condemn it, and it can be immoral even if all humans commend it. In addition, one culture can be judged to be more correct or incorrect than another depending on which one is closer to, or farther from, absolute moral standards than the other (Park, 2011: 160). But what exactly are absolute moral standards? Where do they exist? How can we know about them?

Let me introduce two possible philosophical accounts of absolute moral standards available to cultural absolutists. First, absolute moral standards are abstracta, i.e., they are non-spatiotemporal entities like mathematical entities. They exist in the abstract world,¹ not in the concrete world where material objects exist. We use the faculty of reason to grasp absolute moral standards, and then we apply them to human actions to determine whether they are moral or immoral. Abstract entities exist independently of culture. Just as it is wrong to say that $20+20=40$ is true in reference to the European culture but is false in reference to the Asian culture, so it is wrong to say that torturing babies is moral in reference to the European culture but is immoral in reference to the Asian culture.

Second, “an absolute moral standard is nothing but a moral truth” (Park, 2014: 49). The truth of a statement is independent of culture. It is absurd to say that the statement “Romania is in Europe” is true in reference to the European culture but is false in reference to the Asian culture. Just as to say that the statement “Romania is in Europe” is true entails that there is a descriptive fact in the physical universe that makes the descriptive statement true, so to say that a moral statement is true entails that there is a moral fact in the physical universe that makes the moral statement true. For example, to say that it is true that torturing babies is immoral entails that there is a moral fact that torturing babies is immoral in the physical universe, and that the moral fact makes the moral statement true, which in turn entails that the property of being immoral inheres in the action of torturing babies.² Alvaro (2020) seems to have this account of absolute moral standards in mind, as will become clear below.

¹ It is dubious that the abstract world exists (Park, 2017: 77).

² It is dubious that there are moral properties and facts in the concrete world (Park, 2012: 190).

Cultural absolutists believe that moral judgments and descriptive judgments are the same kind of judgments. On the cultural absolutist account, just as descriptive judgments have truth-values independently of culture, so moral judgments have truth-values independently of culture. For example, just as it is a true judgment that the moon moves around the earth independently of a culture, so it is a true judgment that torturing a baby is immoral independently of a culture.

By contrast, cultural relativists might believe that moral and descriptive judgments are different kinds of judgments. On the cultural relativist account, we can coherently take the cultural relativist attitude toward moral judgments but the cultural absolutist attitude toward descriptive judgments. For example, we do not commit a contradiction when we say that eating meat is moral or immoral depending on culture, but it is true or false that the moon moves around the earth independently of culture. Therefore, some cultural relativists might take the cultural relativist attitude only toward moral judgments, and other cultural relativists might take the cultural relativist attitude toward both moral and descriptive judgments. This distinction between the two different kinds of cultural relativists about cultural relativists will be invoked in the next section where I discuss cultural absolutists' objections to cultural relativism.

3. OBJECTIONS TO THE ANALOGY

According to cultural relativists, just as motion is relative to reference frame, so morality is relative to culture (Harman, 1996: 11; Park, 2011, *passim*). Andrei Cornea (2012) and Alvaro (2020) object that the analogy between motion and morality is flawed and unjustified:

...as others have pointed out, the analogy between morality and motion upon which Park constantly relies is a false analogy (Cornea, 2012: 35). Firstly, Park does not provide any compelling reason as to why morality should be as relative as motion. (Alvaro, 2020: 31)

In response to Cornea's objection, Park (2014: 45) distinguishes between justificatory and clarificatory uses of analogy. The idea is that an analogy can be used to justify a claim or to clarify a claim. Cultural relativists can rely on the analogy between motion and morality not to justify cultural relativism but rather to clarify it.

Park (2011) claims that the justification for cultural relativism comes from Ockham's Razor, saying that "Ockham's Razor favours cultural relativism over absolutism" (Park, 2011: 169). Why do I think so? Cultural absolutism affirms, whereas cultural relativism denies, that absolute moral standards exist. Just as Ockham's Razor motivates physicists to deny the existence of absolute space, it motivates cultural relativists to deny the existence of absolute moral standards, whether they are taken to be abstract entities or moral truths. Other things being equal, we should choose cultural relativism over absolutism.

Cornea (2012) raises an interesting objection to this defense of cultural relativism. He objects that Ockham's Razor can be used in science, but not in moral philosophy:

Yet it seems never to occur to S. Park that Ockham's Razor, so useful a tool in science, is perhaps misplaced in ethics. After all, is really ethics a science, at least in the sense physics, mathematics or logic are said to be sciences? Hardly. So why should philosophers and ethicists ape physicists at any cost? (Cornea, 2012: 38)

This claim about Ockham's Razor is in tension with cultural absolutists' tenet that just as descriptive statements have truth-values independently of culture, so moral statements have truth-values independently of culture. A faithful cultural absolutist would say that just as Ockham's Razor is used in science, so it should be used in ethics. Cornea's contention about Ockham's Razor only reinforces cultural relativists' conviction that moral judgments are profoundly different from descriptive judgments, so we should be cultural relativists about moral judgments, but cultural absolutists about descriptive judgments.

Alvaro raises another insightful objection to the analogy between motion and morality. Suppose that you drive at 50 km/h on a road whose speed limit is 40 km/h, and that the police stop you for speeding. Alvaro states that "It would be of no avail for the driver to try to get out of a speeding ticket by arguing that, in reference to a bicycle travelling at 20 km/h, he was travelling at 30 km/h – 10 km/h under the speed limit!" (Alvaro, 2020: 31). This criticism appears to be a strong case against cultural relativism.

Let me make two comments on this criticism. First, physicists and cultural relativists know that the speed limit is a speed limit in reference to the ground. In other words, they know that the statement "The speed limit

is 40 km/h” makes an implicit reference to the ground, and thus that the statement “The speed limit is 40 km/h with in reference to the ground” is equivalent to the statement “The speed limit is 20 km/h in reference to a bicycle which travels at 20 km/h in reference to the ground in the same direction as you travel.” Consequently, physicists and cultural relativists would not drive faster than 20 km/h in reference to the bicycle in the first place.

Second, imagine that the Nazis attacked the Jews. It would have been of no avail for the Jews to try to stop the Nazis by saying to the Nazis that the Nazi culture was no more correct than their culture, so the Nazis should not attack the Jews. The Nazis would have ignored the Jews’ protest and would have nonetheless attacked them, thinking that their culture was more correct than their targets’ culture, just as the police would ignore the relativistic driver and cite her, thinking that they are right to do it. This indicates that it is not cultural relativism but rather cultural absolutism that has a harmful implication for our daily lives.

Cultural absolutists might object that it is self-refuting for cultural relativists to take Einstein’s theory of relativity, a scientific theory, to be absolute. Cultural relativists should consistently take the theory of relativity to be relative to culture, i.e., they should believe that the theory of relativity is true, say, in reference to the Jewish culture, but is false in reference to the non-Jewish culture. Contrary to this expectation, however, they take the theory of relativity to be true independently of culture. It is incoherent for them to do so.

However, it is wrong to think that cultural relativists should take the cultural relativist attitude toward descriptive judgments. As we have seen in Section 3 above, cultural relativists may take the cultural absolutist attitude toward descriptive judgments. Therefore, they may take the theory of relativity to be absolute, i.e., they may take it to be true independently of culture. In addition, they may also take cultural relativism to be absolute. After all, cultural relativism is not a moral judgment but rather a descriptive judgment. It is true or false depending on whether morality is relative to culture. Hence, it is true or false independently of culture.

4. DANGEROUS IMPLICATION

Some members of the Nazi party betrayed Hitler. For example, Oskar Schindler saved Jews, and some German soldiers refused to kill Jews. Let me call them “anti-Hitlerians.” Were anti-Hitlerians cultural relativists or absolutists? Alvaro answers that these individuals were not cultural relativists:

Indeed, it is precisely because these individuals were not moral relativists that they saved Jews. Had they espoused moral relativism, they would have agreed with their own cultural morality and allowed Hitler’s atrocities to be carried out. (Alvaro, 2020: 25).

On Alvaro’s account, anti-Hitlerians were cultural absolutists, thinking that Hitler’s atrocious actions were immoral independently of culture. As a result, they saved Jews. This hypothesis appears to be plausible.

It is a historical hypothesis that anti-Hitlerians embraced cultural absolutism. Alvaro does not present historical evidence to justify it, which is not a problem because the issue between cultural relativists and absolutists is not whether anti-Hitlerians were cultural relativists or absolutists, but rather how they would have behaved had they espoused cultural relativism or absolutism, and whether cultural relativism or absolutism has higher potential to be harmful to our daily lives. Cultural relativists aim to establish that cultural absolutism has a dangerous implication for our daily lives, whereas cultural absolutists aim to establish that cultural relativism has a dangerous implication for our daily lives. Alvaro jumps into this debate, saying that if anti-Hitlerians had been cultural relativists, they would have followed Hitler’s orders.

In my view, had anti-Hitlerians been cultural relativists, they would have thought that the Hitlerian culture was on a par with the Jewish culture, and hence they would not have joined the Nazi party in the first place. By contrast, had anti-Hitlerians been cultural absolutists, they would have thought that the Hitlerian culture was more correct than the Jewish culture, and hence they would have followed Hitler’s orders. Again, it is not cultural relativism but rather cultural absolutism that has higher potential to be harmful to our daily lives. In addition, anti-Hitlerians’ actions of saving Jews can be accommodated by cultural relativism; according to cultural relativism, their actions were moral in reference to the anti-Hitlerian culture.

5. MORAL PROGRESS

Cultural relativism claims that no culture is more correct than any other, which implies that the current culture is no more correct than the past culture, which in turn implies that there is no moral progress. Alvaro raises the following objection to this implication:

Firstly, what exactly are “the past culture” and “the present culture”? Are we not talking about the same culture? And when does the old culture end and the new culture begin? It is more plausible to say that it is the same culture evolving morally. (Alvaro, 2020, pp. 27–28)

This objection raises an interesting issue. Can we talk about past and present cultures? On Alvaro’s account, the answer is “No” because we cannot draw a line between past and present cultures. We can only say that the same culture evolves over time.

We can grant this objection but my previous argument can be recast within Alvaro’s framework that the same culture evolves from t_1 to t_2 . My previous argument is that there are no absolute moral standards, so the current culture is no more correct than the past culture (Park, 2011: 165).

I can now say that there are no absolute moral standards, so the culture at t_1 is no more correct than the culture at t_2 . Therefore, it is not a lethal criticism against cultural relativism to say that it is illegitimate to talk about past and present cultures.

Let me make another comment on Alvaro’s objection that we cannot draw a line between past and present cultures, so it is problematic to talk about past and present cultures. This objection backfires on Alvaro’s own position. He states that “it is obvious that many people who were part of the American culture in the past opposed slavery and thought that slavery was morally bankrupt from the start” (Alvaro, 2020: 28). Note that he uses the phrase “the American culture.” We can ask similar questions to Alvaro. Can we draw a line between the American culture and the non-American culture? Alaska and Russia face each other. Where exactly does the American culture end? Where exactly does the Russian culture begin? Since we cannot draw a line between the American culture and the non-American culture, it is problematic to talk about the American culture.

To take another example, Alvaro states, “Moral absolutism is the notion according to which there are moral principles by which all peoples’ actions

may be judged” (Alvaro, 2020: 33). Note that he uses the term “peoples.” Asians and Europeans are different peoples. Now, there are people whose mothers are Asians but whose fathers are Europeans. There are also people whose uncles are Asians but whose aunts are Europeans. Where should we draw the line between Asians and Europeans? Where does a people begin? Where does a people end? Since we cannot draw a line between peoples, it is problematic to talk about peoples. A philosophical moral from this discussion is that it is hard to find a philosophical position that does not invoke vague terms.

Let me turn to Alvaro’s another interesting criticism against cultural relativism concerning moral progress. No one would choose slavery and dictatorship over equality and democracy:

If today’s equality and democracy were neither better nor worse than yesterday’s slavery and dictatorship, then one would have no qualms living in the past. But no one would ever live in the past, that is, one would never trade equality and democracy for slavery and dictatorship. (Alvaro, 2020: 28)

We would choose the present culture over the past culture, which implies that we have made moral progress, and that cultural relativism is therefore false. This criticism appears to be another strong argument against cultural relativism.

How do I respond to this argument? The fact that you and I prefer the present culture to the past culture only shows that you and I belong to the present culture, and that you and I use the present culture to assess certain actions, rules, and systems of the past. It does not show that the present culture is closer to absolute moral standards than is the past culture, nor that you and I use absolute moral standards to assess the past and present cultures.

Let me turn to Alvaro’s related insightful suggestion that “The change from slavery to equality cannot be explained other than in terms of moral improvement from a morally bad situation to a morally good one” (Alvaro, 2020: 29). In my opinion, this explanation of the change would be rejected even by cultural absolutists because it puts the cart before the horse. It is conceptually wrong to say that we moved from slavery to equality because we made a moral improvement, but it is conceptually right to say that we made a moral improvement because we moved from slavery to equality. Cultural absolutists would wonder how there could be

a moral improvement independently of the change from slavery to equality.

Let me now discuss Alvaro's intriguing argument for cultural absolutism, viz., cultural absolutism best explains why we moved from slavery to equality:

Thus, if we moved from slavery to equality, the best explanation is that a world that contains slavery is morally inferior to a world that does not contain slavery. Or, equality is morally better than slavery. To say that one is inferior and the other superior implies the existence of absolute (objective) moral values. (Alvaro, 2020: 29)

The idea seems to be that moral properties inhere in slavery and equality. When slavery was in practice, we saw the property of being moral in slavery and the property of being immoral in equality. However, we somehow came to instead see the property of being immoral in slavery and the property of being moral in equality. As a result, we moved from slavery to equality.

However, cultural relativists have an alternative explanation according to which when slavery was in practice, we had a positive feeling toward slavery and a negative feeling toward equality. However, we somehow came to acquire a negative feeling toward slavery and a positive feeling toward equality. As a result, we moved from slavery to equality. Alternatively, there were slavery-supporters and slavery-opposers when slavery was in practice. The political power of slavery-supporters was greater than that of slavery-opposers. However, the political power shifted after slavery-opposers defeated slavery-supporters in the Civil War. As a result, the American culture abolished slavery and adopted equality. Neither this psychological explanation nor this political explanation postulates the existence of moral properties that allegedly exist in the world; therefore, Ockham's Razor favors them over cultural absolutists' explanation.

6. CROSS-CULTURAL MORAL JUDGMENTS

6.1 Unnecessary Suffering

Alvaro advances another strong objection to cultural relativism, viz., some moral principles are universally accepted, and it is obvious that they are not relative to culture:

No sensible person would ever hold that unnecessary suffering is morally good or permissible. To say that these deep-seated moral convictions are, in the end, relative just flies in the face of reason and in the face of our moral experience. (Alvaro, 2020: 24)

Along with Alvaro are Theodore Schick, Jr. and Lewis Vaughn (2010: 365) who claim that it is a universal moral principle that unnecessary suffering is wrong, and that such principles are counterexamples to cultural relativism, which asserts, according to them, that there are no universally accepted moral principles.

Let me make the following two critical comments. First, there are two variants of cultural relativism. Harman's variant states that "It is unlikely that any nontrivial moral principles are universally accepted in all societies" (Harman, 1996: 6). His version conflicts with the existence of universally accepted moral principles. By contrast, Park's (2011: 163) variant states that all cultures might approve or disapprove of certain actions. My version is compatible with the existence of universally accepted moral principles. Suppose that all cultures make the cross-cultural moral judgment that torturing babies is immoral. On Park's account, torturing babies is immoral in reference to all cultures.

Second, Park (2011) does not claim that it is relative to culture that unnecessary suffering is wrong. I (2014: 50) rather claim that it is an analytic statement that unnecessary suffering is wrong, i.e., it is true in virtue of what it means. To say that a suffering is unnecessary means that it is wrong, and to say that a suffering is wrong means that it is unnecessary. I emphasize that a counterexample is required to refute his view that it is an analytic statement that unnecessary suffering is wrong. A counterexample would be "an example of necessary but wrong suffering or an example of unnecessary but right suffering" (Park, 2014: 50). Instead of presenting a counterexample, however, Alvaro states that "No sensible person would ever hold that unnecessary suffering is morally good or permissible" (Alvaro, 2020: 24). In my view, no sensible person would hold that unnecessary suffering is right because to hold it is as insensible as to hold that a bachelor is married.

Cultural relativists would not claim that an analytic statement is true relative to culture. After all, it is unreasonable to say that a bachelor is unmarried in reference to a culture but he is married in reference to another culture. Cultural relativists would not claim either that a synthetic

statement is true relative to culture. After all, it is also unreasonable to say that it is true that Romania is located in Europe in reference to the European culture, but that it is false in reference to the Asian culture. In sum, cultural relativists take the cultural relativist attitude toward moral judgments, but the cultural absolutist attitude toward analytic and synthetic judgments.

6.2. Torturing babies

Cultural absolutists (Thomson, 1990: 20; Alvaro, 2020: 23) use the example of torturing babies to argue against cultural relativism. The idea is that all cultures around the world make the cross-cultural moral judgment that torturing babies is immoral, so it appears to be problematic for cultural relativists to say that torturing babies is moral or immoral depending on the culture in reference to which it is evaluated. Since this example is so advantageous and useful to cultural absolutists, I use it below to argue against cultural absolutism.

How can we explain the ubiquitous moral phenomenon that torturing babies is judged to be immoral? Alvaro (2020: 23) claims that cultural relativists do not have an adequate answer to this question. It is inadequate for cultural relativists to say that all cultures make the cross-cultural moral judgment because they have adopted the same convention. After all, “If it were due to convention, any one culture could readily hold the opposite view on whether torturing babies for fun is moral” (Alvaro, 2020: 23).

In my view, however, cultural relativists would not say that the cross-cultural moral judgment is due to convention. After all, the cross-cultural moral judgment is a kind of convention, and thus it is circular to say that the cross-cultural moral judgment is due to convention. Cultural relativists would rather say, appealing to molecular biology, that all cultures make the cross-cultural moral judgment because all humans are genetically similar to one another, and as a result, they feel similarly toward torturing babies. They might also appeal to evolutionary psychology (Ruse, 1998, pp. 218–222), saying that feeling repulsion toward torturing babies increased the probability that our common ancestors survived and reproduced, and the emotive property was passed on to the next generations. As a result, we commonly feel repulsion toward torturing babies.

Do cultural absolutists have an explanation of why all cultures make the cross-cultural moral judgment that torturing babies is immoral? Alvaro

(2020) does not give his own explanation, so we can only imagine how cultural absolutists would give an explanation. They believe that absolute moral standards “exist independently of the opinions and preferences of humans” (Alvaro, 2020: 33). Consequently, they would suggest that all cultures make the cross-cultural moral judgment that torturing babies is immoral because all cultures commonly see the property of being immoral in the action of torturing babies.

In my view, however, it is not plausible at all to say that all cultures commonly see the property of being immoral in the action of torturing babies. Quite the contrary, no culture can see the property of being immoral in the action of torturing babies. After all, no one can pinpoint the property of being immoral which purportedly exists in the action of torturing babies. Does it exist in the torturer’s hand? Does it exist in the baby’s blood? Can you detect it with the use of instruments, such as a bright bulb, electron microscopes, and infrared detectors? The answers to these questions are all “No,” according to David Hume, who claims that you can only find moral properties in “your own breast” (Hume, 1888/1978, pp. 468–469). To put it differently, you can only find your positive and negative feelings toward human actions.

Moreover, just because all cultures make the cross-cultural gustatory judgment that sugar is sweet, it does not follow that sweetness exists in sugar. The fact that all cultures make the same gustatory judgment rather shows that all humans have similar tastes, and that they are genetically similar to one another. Analogously, just because the moral rule “Don’t torture babies” is universally accepted, it does not follow that the property of being immoral is immanent in the action of torturing babies. The existence of universally accepted moral rules rather shows that all humans feel similarly toward certain actions, and that they are genetically similar to one another.

7. NO ARGUMENTATION?

Can we construct arguments for and against moral judgments within the framework of cultural relativism? Alvaro’s answer is “No.” He says that “if relativism is true, then moral argumentation is not a possibility” (Alvaro, 2020: 27). In my view, this assertion about cultural relativism is

false. We can construct the following arguments within the framework of cultural relativism:

Killing an innocent person is wrong in reference to the Korean culture.

Abortion involves killing an innocent person.

Therefore, abortion is wrong in reference to the Korean culture.

Killing an innocent person is wrong in reference to the Korean culture.

Abortion usually involves killing an innocent person.

Therefore, abortion is wrong in reference to the Korean culture.

The first argument is deductively valid, and the second one is inductively correct. Cultural relativists can cheerfully admit that we use such arguments to persuade our opponents concerning moral matters. Therefore, it is wrong to think that moral argumentation is impossible within the framework of cultural relativism.

8. EVALUATING CULTURES

Cultural relativism asserts that there are no such things as absolute moral standards, so we cannot say that one culture is more correct or incorrect than another. Cultural absolutism, by contrast, asserts that there are absolute moral standards, so we can say that one culture is more correct or incorrect than another. Alvaro claims that contrary to what cultural relativism asserts, we can show that a culture is right or wrong by constructing arguments:

However, we can show through rational argumentation that the serial killers' culture is morally wrong. We have compelling reasons to condemn such a culture. On the other hand, the serial killers' culture does not have any rational reason to justify their position. (Alvaro, 2020: 30)

It is quite intuitive that we can construct arguments to justify the non-criminal culture but not to justify the serial killers' culture. It appears, therefore, that Alvaro has made a strong case against cultural relativism.

Serial killers are genetically programmed not to feel sympathy toward their innocent victims and not to repent of their heinous deeds (Park, 2013). Therefore, it is dubious that we can persuade them through rational argumentation that their culture is wrong. Suppose, however, that we have successfully persuaded some serial killers through rational argumentation

that it is wrong to kill innocent people. What does this success prove? It does not prove that there are absolute moral standards by which we can judge whether the serial killers' culture is wrong. It rather proves that the serial killers have just joined the non-criminal culture, or that they now use the non-criminal culture to assess serial killers' behavior.

Suppose that cultural absolutists offer the following argument to show that the non-criminal culture is right, and that the serial killers' culture is wrong:

Killing innocent people is wrong.

The members of the serial killers' culture kill innocent people.

Therefore, the serial killers' culture is wrong.

Cultural relativists would quickly point out that the first premise makes an implicit reference to the non-criminal culture, so it should state that killing innocent people is bad in reference to the non-criminal culture. Moreover, serial killers might run the following argument to defend their behavior:

Killing innocent people is right in reference to the serial killers' culture.

The members of the serial killers' culture kill innocent people.

Therefore, the serial killers' culture is right.

An interesting question arises: why should we choose the non-criminal culture over the serial killers' culture to determine whether serial killers' actions are moral or immoral?

Alvaro might say that the non-criminal culture is more *useful* than is the serial killers' culture, so the non-criminal culture is more correct than the serial killers' culture. This argument, however, is profoundly different from the cultural absolutist argument that the non-criminal culture is closer to absolute moral standards, so the non-criminal culture is more correct than the serial killers' culture. Cultural relativists would accept that the non-criminal culture is more useful than the serial killers' culture, but they would reject that the non-criminal culture is closer to absolute moral standards than is the serial killers' culture.

Suppose that we present arguments to show that the ground is a more useful frame of reference than is a bicycle. One such argument is that it is more convenient for the police to use the ground than a bicycle as a frame of reference for the purpose of issuing citations. It does not follow that

the ground is a more correct frame of reference. As far as physicists are concerned, there is no absolute space, so we cannot say that the velocity of the ground is closer to the velocity of absolute space than is the velocity of the bicycle, nor can we say that the ground is a more correct frame of reference than is the bicycle. Cultural relativists would say the same thing *mutatis mutandis* about cultures. We can construct arguments to show that a culture is more useful or useless than another. However, there are no absolute moral standards, and thus we cannot say that a culture is more correct or incorrect than another.

Let me add that it is a consequential fallacy to say that since a belief is useful, it is true, or that since a belief is useless, it is false. For example, it is a consequential fallacy to say that since belief in God is useful, it is true that God exists. It is common knowledge in epistemology that a useful belief might be false, and that a useless belief might true (Goldman, 1999, pp. 42–44). One commits the consequential fallacy when one fails to distinguish between useful and true beliefs, and between useless and false beliefs. Cultural absolutists would commit the consequential fallacy if they claim that since the non-criminal culture is more useful than the serial killers' culture, the non-criminal culture is closer to moral truths than is serial killers' culture.

9. CONCLUSION

The justification for cultural relativism does not come from the analogy between motion and morality but from Ockham's Razor. It is not cultural relativism but rather cultural absolutism that has greater potential to be harmful to our daily lives. Cultural relativism better explains the change from slavery to equality and the existence of some unanimous moral judgments than does cultural absolutism. Cultural relativists can happily acknowledge that we construct arguments to persuade our opponents regarding moral matters. The fact that we construct arguments for and against cultures does not establish the existence of moral truths; it rather establishes the usefulness or uselessness of a culture. Cultural relativism is a more viable ethical theory than is cultural absolutism.

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