

On the Truth in Vulgar Relativism

W. ASHLEY McMURRAY

The worst of it is that subjectivism is not just an inconsequential intellectual flourish or badge of theoretical chic. It is used to deflect argument, or to belittle the pretensions of the arguments of others. Claims that something is without relativistic qualification true or false, right or wrong, good or bad, risk being derided as expressions of a parochial perspective or form of life—not as a preliminary to showing that they are mistaken whereas something else is right, but as a way of showing that nothing is right and that instead we are all expressing our personal or cultural points of view. The actual result has been a growth in the already extreme intellectual laziness of contemporary culture and the collapse of serious argument throughout the lower reaches of the humanities and social sciences, together with a refusal to take seriously, as anything other than first-person avowals, the objective arguments of others.

—Thomas Nagel

I. Introduction: Postmodern Subjectivity and Moral Relativism

The climate of postmodern academia has led to the flourishing of subjectivist and constructivist theories of knowledge, reason, and morality. This is especially the case in the humanities and social sciences, where many scholars have argued that a serious reevaluation and rectification of traditional conceptions of knowledge is long overdue (Boghossian 8). The trend to situate and relativize knowledge, however, has not gone without serious opposition. While many analytic philosophers

W. Ashley McMurray is a senior majoring in philosophy at Brigham Young University. His primary interests include ethics, metaphysics, and philosophy of language. In fall 2015 he will attend Brigham Young University's J. Reuben Clark Law School while applying to graduate programs in philosophy.

dismiss constructivism as merely incoherent, some, such as Thomas Nagel and Paul Boghossian, worry that radical subjectivity has become a degenerative influence and bemoan what has become a deeply rooted suspicion of traditional objectivity (Nagel 6). I agree that it is imperative to defend objective truth, especially objective moral truth, against a fashionable tendency to resort to relativistic accounts which promise to secure our most firmly held beliefs in a world of increasingly diverse and often opposing values. Against this background, I intend to address one particular defense of moral relativism by Thomas Bennigson.

In “The Truth in Vulgar Relativism” Bennigson mounts a defense of a popular brand of moral relativism against criticisms raised by Bernard Williams. This vein of moral relativism is highly influential because it purports to provide grounds for a principle of universal tolerance: because all morality is culturally dependent, it is argued, individuals of one particular culture have no genuine grounds upon which to genuinely criticize or interfere with those who possess a different, perhaps conflicting, moral system. In his book *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Williams brands this relativist justification of tolerance as “vulgar relativism” and criticizes its gross inconsistency in trying to draw universal principles from a system that denies them (20). Bennigson suggests that this inconsistency can be avoided by appealing to a more sophisticated conception of relativism that includes one or more auxiliary principles found within an agent’s own cultural norms—thus saving vulgar relativism’s claim as grounds for tolerance. Although his defense appears to circumvent Williams’ objections, I will show that his argument is invalid and not only fails to save vulgar relativism from incoherency, but ultimately undermines tolerance altogether.

To show how Bennigson’s conception of vulgar relativism thwarts its own project, this paper will proceed as follows. In sections II and III, I summarize Williams’ criticism and Bennigson’s defense of vulgar relativism respectively. Section IV contains Bennigson’s response to a possible objection of arbitrariness and includes my concern that his solution risks sliding into a non-relativistic position. Following this discussion, I argue in section V that Bennigson misconceives his own position and that the auxiliary principle that he proposes not only cannot be used to ground a principle of tolerance, but subverts it. I then conclude in section VI with some final remarks on relativism and morality.

II. Williams’ Rejection of Vulgar Relativism as Grounds for Tolerance

Moral relativism is a metaethical position that stipulates that an action is morally right or wrong relative only to the norms of an individual or group. Relativism has become popular because some, such as Bennigson, argue that a specific type of moral relativism called “agent-relativism” (age-rel) is capable of justifying a principle of cross-cultural tolerance (271). Age-rel holds that the relevant norms for evaluating an action’s moral status originate in the performing agent’s group or culture.¹ In this sense, age-rel is a functionalist position in that a practice or action can be judged only according to the function it plays in its own system. Williams summarizes vulgar relativism’s argument for a principle of tolerance in three propositions beginning with age-rel: “that [1] ‘right’ means (can only be coherently understood as meaning) ‘right for a given society’; that [2] ‘right for a given society’ is to be understood in a functionalist sense; and that (therefore) [3] it is wrong for people in one society to condemn, interfere with, etc., the values of another society” (20). Since cross-cultural criticism is prohibited, vulgar relativism is heralded for providing grounds for tolerance between all cultures.

For example, the moral system of patriarchal society X holds that it is morally wrong for a woman to hold a position of power (economically or socially) over a man. However, the moral system of progressive society Y, which shares a border with X, maintains that men and women have equal claim to any and all positions of authority and influence. Thus the moral systems of X and Y are incompatible and have caused the two societies to conflict numerous times throughout their history. According to the vulgar relativist, both societies would find strong grounds to tolerate each other and co-exist peacefully if they adopt age-rel. If members of society X recognize that their belief regarding whether or not women should be allowed positions of influence over men can be understood as right or wrong only according to their own culture, then they will see that they cannot judge the alternative view of people in society Y and vice versa. Since neither society can make genuine moral appraisals of the practices of the other, they will see that it is wrong to do so. Thus if age-rel is true—and the vulgar relativist claims that it obviously is—all societies must recognize that it is *wrong* to make cross-cultural judgments or interfere with one another, and a universal principle of tolerance is established.

¹ I will use “group” and “culture” synonymously throughout this paper.

Williams polemicizes vulgar relativism as “possibly the most absurd view to have been advanced even in moral philosophy” (20). The absurdity arises from the fact that the conclusion is obviously inconsistent with the premises. The first premise denies all universally binding moral principles. After all, *all* moral principles are relative to the cultural norms of the agent. Despite this, the relativist concludes in an ironic twist by affirming a universally binding claim: that it is wrong to judge conflicting values of other cultures. In other words, the relativist uses a theory negating all non-relative principles to do the very thing not allowed by that theory—to provide a non-relative, universally binding principle. This is “the anthropologist’s heresy” (21). Consequently, vulgar relativism not only fails to provide grounds for tolerance, but effectively undermines the principle of tolerance altogether. If all moral principles are right only according to the agent’s own moral norms, nothing prevents a highly intolerant group from actively interfering with the values and actions of any other as long as such interference is allowed by their own norms. Trapped by inconsistency, the vulgar relativist must abandon the very virtue he or she intended to secure.

III. Bennigson’s Defense of Vulgar Relativism

While Bennigson agrees that Williams’ portrayal of vulgar relativism is incoherent, he suggests that a more sophisticated conception of the argument succeeds in providing grounds for tolerance. He argues that although moral relativity per se is insufficient to justify a principle of tolerance, such a principle is possible if age-rel is combined with an appropriate auxiliary principle internal to the agent’s own cultural norms. To demonstrate, Bennigson gives the following principle:²

OWA-PIP: Interference with others’ actions is permissible if and only if those actions are wrong. (275)

Since an action is wrong only according to the culture of the agent performing the action, it is not difficult to see how OWA-PIP’s addition leads to tolerance. To borrow from Bennigson’s own example, consider a scenario involving two members of a cannibal society: Charlie and Albert. If Charlie plans to kill and eat his plump but otherwise innocent neighbor Albert and doing so accords with his cultural norms, then I must judge it to be right even though my own social norms condemn cannibalism as morally reprehensible (275). Because Charlie’s action is right (or at the very least, not

wrong), OWA-PIP prevents me from interfering, i.e. my non-interference principle demands that I tolerate Charlie killing and eating Albert. Thus, age-rel in conjunction with a suitable auxiliary principle provide reasonable grounds for practicing tolerance across cultures.

Bennigson anticipates two objections that threaten his modified version of vulgar relativism: (i) the appraising agent may have auxiliary principles other than OWA-PIP that justify interference, and (ii) accepting age-rel risks undermining all moral principles. The first objection is easily dispatched. An opponent of age-rel might protest that it is highly plausible that our moral system contains an auxiliary principle that demands that we prevent harm to the innocent. If this principle’s functional role is more fundamental within our moral system than OWA-PIP, it would override the non-interference principle. In this case, age-rel permits us to forego tolerance and interfere with Charlie’s cannibalism (275). Thus, Bennigson’s argument seems self-defeating. However, this result proves to be unproblematic. The very fact that a decision has to be made at all between which principles to follow is sufficient to show that age-rel plays a significant role in promoting tolerance, albeit with a little help. He aims to show not that age-rel leads *necessarily* to tolerant behavior, but that age-rel makes a difference in decisions to be tolerant even if a culture’s specific moral norms end up favoring interference (276). Even a nudge toward tolerance is enough.

IV. Arbitrariness, Respect, and Bennigson’s Unintended Appeal to Universal Principles

The second objection is more difficult to resolve. In essence it raises the concern that accepting age-rel actually undermines all moral principles, tolerance included. After all, if grounds upon which to judge one moral system as preferable to another do not exist, choosing becomes arbitrary. If our moral systems are arbitrary, then there seems to be little reason for us to accept that moral systems make serious claims on us; therefore, we can do as we please. This objection can be focused on moral principles themselves: if our moral principles are nothing more than ungrounded social norms, and if we understand that actions are right merely because social norms permit them, then both our moral principles and the moral status of any action lose their power to seriously influence our decisions. Two examples will help illustrate this point.

Consider the case of a woman who is confronted by two conflicting rules of etiquette. The first rule posits that when eating, one ought to place one’s free hands *below* the table; the second, that one ought to place them *above* the table. Given that she is provided with no grounds,

² “Only with Wrong Actions’ Permissible Interference Principle.”

nor can she be, for judging in favor of one rule over the other, any choice between them will necessarily be arbitrary. Moreover, nothing prevents her from switching back and forth between the two at will except perhaps some non-rational attachment acquired through habit or some pre-rational psychological disposition.

Perhaps an even more stripped down example might be useful to demonstrate the danger of arbitrariness. Imagine a man who must choose between two boxes, one red and one blue. Except for their color, the boxes are indistinguishable in every respect. Any choice the man makes will be arbitrary, since there is nothing—no objective ground—by which he could rationally judge one to be superior to the other. A selection will necessarily be made either at random or by some subjective inclination toward one color or the other. In either case, it cannot be said that he chose rightly or wrongly, or even poorly, neither can he be called inconsistent if he changes his mind after making a selection. Similarly, if there is no objective ground upon which to compare and judge moral systems, then neither they nor their principles, can be said to be preferable any more than the boxes can—morality, made impotent, ceases to be a genuine concern, and tolerance, stripped of significance, is left akin to an interesting though insignificant hue.

In response, Bennigson claims that if we can find compelling reasons to respect the principles of our moral system, then those reasons will also apply to those of other systems and the significance and force of both morality and tolerance can be saved. According to Bennigson, we respect moral principles because of their purpose: they provide the peace and stability necessary for individuals living in societies to grow and reach their potential (278). That we are required to drive on the right side of the road rather than the left is surely arbitrary, but no one makes serious claims that such a requirement is worthless or lacks normative force. We obey and value rules of the road because they help prevent chaos on the streets. Just like rules of the road, the arbitrariness of the principles in a moral system is irrelevant—their function is reason enough to obey and attach worth to them (278). Therefore, if these grounds for valuing moral norms is accepted, then age-rel does not subvert morality and our moral principles will continue to affect our justifications for interfering or tolerating. I believe that Bennigson is correct in his justification for the value of arbitrary moral norms. However, it also seems that there are reasonable grounds to suspect that accepting his argument ultimately requires us to reject moral relativism altogether.

It appears as if, without realizing it, Bennigson saves age-rel from undermining morality by appealing to universal, non-relative principles. The auxiliary principles of a moral system survive age-rel on the basis of values

that provide grounds for respecting them even if they are arbitrary. This respect stems from the value of peaceful coexistence and growth. Lest he is accused of legitimizing respect for morality on purely theoretical grounds, Bennigson holds that we *do* in fact subscribe to this value (278). However, it seems plausible that the motivating power of this universal value stems from an associated principle: that one ought to promote peaceful living and human development. Moreover, it seems intuitive and uncontroversial that if one genuinely desires some state of affairs, then one also ought to work to bring them about. Thus if all people desire to live in a state of peaceful coexistence and growth, then all people ought to promote this state. If this is true, it is unclear that Bennigson's version of vulgar relativism is even a form of relativism.

In order for age-rel to not undermine all morality, the principle that one ought to promote harmonious coexistence must be extended to all other moral systems as a foundation for those systems. Otherwise they would be arbitrary and we could ignore them. However, if this principle legitimizes all moral systems, and if all moral systems *do* actually subscribe to and require such a principle, then it is difficult to imagine how such a principle could be described as something other than a non-relative, universal, and necessary moral principle (274). But if such a universal principle exists, then it could be appealed to in order to make normative moral judgments across cultures: the norms or actions of any culture that do not promote stability and growth can be considered *wrong*. With such a standard, it is not difficult to conceive that morality is not relative in any fundamental sense at all. It is equally plausible that differences in cultural moral norms are simply the result of each society's more or less successful fleshing out of those fundamental moral principles into normative social mores. These could then be evaluated for objective legitimacy according to those fundamental principles. Relativism that can sustain itself only on universal principles is not relativism at all.

V. Moral Bearing and Validity

However, even if we accept that age-rel avoids undermining morality without relying on universal principles, Bennigson's argument is still invalid. According to his argument, age-rel supports tolerance because it helps us determine that actions we would normally judge to be wrong are, in fact, not wrong. This, in conjunction with OWA-PIP, determines that we cannot interfere with the actions of agents belonging to other cultures. However, if the moral status of an action is relevant only to the agent's group, then to say that an action is right or wrong is to say that its moral

rightness or wrongness is limited exclusively to the agent's group itself. Therefore, the moral status of an action would have no moral implications for another group. If the moral status of an action does not bear on outside observers, then all actions performed by outside agents are essentially amoral—such actions are neither right nor wrong. If this is true, then the non-interference principle would never come into play because it requires a genuine moral status in order to evaluate whether or not it is appropriate to interfere. OWA-PIP would simply be irrelevant.

It is conceivable that Bennigson could claim this is an uncharitable reading; that all that is required to avoid this problem is a slight clarification. Namely, he could assert that OWA-PIP operates according to the truth-value of the moral status of an action for the agent. Thus the principle could be reformulated as:

OWA-PIP': Interference with others' actions is permissible if and only if it is *true* that those actions are wrong within the agent's moral system (i.e., that it is true that those actions are wrong *for the agent*).

Now the truth-value, rather than the moral status itself, brings the non-interference principle into play. That is, the relevant question is this: is it *true* that the agent's action is wrong according to his or her moral system? If it is true, then an outsider operating under OWA-PIP' may rightly interfere. Thus, the moral value (i.e. the rightness or wrongness) of an agent's action is relevant only insofar as it determines a truth-value.

This distinction is important because of the nature of moral relativism. The moral relativist runs into trouble when making cross-cultural judgments of moral values because the nature of relativism prohibits that very activity. On the other hand, the moral relativist needs no reservations when dealing with truth-values since, unlike moral values, they function as objective facts about the world—anyone can look at and evaluate them. However, a problem remains: it is unclear how the shift of concern from moral values to truth-values is justified apart from mere argumentative convenience.

Although the modified principle appears to solve the issue regarding cross-cultural moral evaluation, it is difficult to see why this concern for the truth-value is not ad hoc. As Williams indicated, our moral principles are understood as functionalist insofar as they play a meaningful role within our value system (20). To show that OWA-PIP' is not ad hoc, we must answer why anyone would care about the truth-value regarding the moral status of actions performed by agents outside his or her own culture. To ask this is to ask why it matters to me that it is *true* that an action is right or wrong for someone else (i.e. of an agent from another culture). But this

question merely pushes the initial problem back one step; it is equivalent to asking why it matters to me that an action is morally right or wrong for someone else. It seems *prima facie* true that my concern over whether or not it is true that an action is morally wrong depends on my concern about the action's moral value itself. Thus, it seems reasonable to ask why it should matter to me if a woman violates her cultural norms by putting her hands above dining table rather than below.

I can think of two reasons relevant to Bennigson's argument why this may be the case. First, by acting immorally within their system, they affect me indirectly. For example, an agent who acts immorally harms that system's ability to achieve peaceful coexistence and growth; since peace and stability are objective goods that I value and ought to promote, I ought to interfere. However, this relies not on the fact that their actions are wrong within their normative system, but rather on the fact that their actions contribute to a state of affairs that bears upon *my* normative system. If the woman placing her hand above the table contributes to some objective instability in the world, then I will respond, not because her action was *wrong for her*, but because there is a consequence that is *wrong for me*—it is wrong to allow actions that are harmful to peaceful coexistence and growth because they are the very values that justify moral systems in the first place. In other words, the morally relevant factor isn't that someone's action is *wrong*, but that something is causing instability and harm, and presumably any source of instability or harm—even actions consistent with their norms—would justify my interference. Thus, neither age-rel nor OWA-PIP' ever come into play as factors when determining whether or not to be tolerant. Moreover, this reasoning risks falling back onto the universal moral principles discussed in section IV that allow us to judge actions cross-culturally. Regardless, appealing to indirect effects such as instability appears to be incompatible with age-rel.

The second reason the moral status of an act to the agent might matter is that their wrong action directly affects me in such a way that my own principles demand a response. For example, an individual of another culture adhering to strict pacifism may decide to attack me. But in this case, the fact that they are acting against their own norms is *irrelevant*. I would interfere even if they belonged to a warring culture which demanded such an attack—in the face of potential harm, the moral status of the act to the agent is insignificant in my determination to interfere. It would be a gross absurdity to think that, upon being attacked by members of an aggressive barbarian culture, I would entertain for even the briefest moment the thought: "As their attack is justified according to their culture, I should tolerate them and allow them to maim and, perhaps, kill me." However, it is precisely this thought that age-rel combined with OWA-PIP' would

require. It seems more reasonable to think that I care about their action only insofar as I judge them to be right or wrong within my own normative system, and I judge that it is wrong to attack me. Thus, the morally relevant content arises again from the fact that I judge the action from my own moral system. All that matters is that I prevent the harm, presumably by interfering. If we have no genuine concern for the moral value of an action for the agent, then we have no genuine concern regarding its truth-value and OWA-PIP' can be abandoned. Failing on both accounts, it appears, as before, that the moral status of an act has no moral bearing on an outside observer under an agent-relative conception of morality.

This lack of moral bearing is exactly what we mean when we say things like "Such and such an action is right *for so and so*." For instance, we might say that it is right *for Charlie* to eat Albert. It would be, however, perplexing to say that it is right *for me* that Charlie eats Albert. It is unclear what, if any, meaning such a statement would have. For to say that Charlie eating Albert is right for me would be equivalent to saying that Charlie's action has moral significance relative to my own cultural values—a proposition prohibited by age-rel. Such a statement would be incoherent at best. Thus, an action performed by an agent belonging to another culture can have only a non-moral status for me. For me, Charlie's cannibalism is neither right nor wrong; for me, Charlie's actions have no moral content whatsoever.

If such actions have only non-moral status for me, then the moral status of any action performed by a member of another culture never bears on my auxiliary principles, including OWA-PIP. This is because the non-interference principle governs *my own* actions—it dictates whether it is right or wrong *for me* to interfere. Considering that age-rel allows only actions with relevant moral significance (i.e., actions performed by agents in my own culture) to be evaluated by my auxiliary principles, OWA-PIP becomes incoherent (or at least irrelevant) when dealing cross-culturally since actions performed by persons outside of my culture have no moral significance for me. Thus, it appears that Bennigson's version of OWA-PIP is ill formed. The principle would be more effectively stated as:

OWA-PIP'': Interference with others' actions is permissible if and only if doing so would not violate some other principle within the observer's system.

However, this reformulation is trivially true and fails to give vulgar relativists what they want. If it is true that I have an auxiliary principle that dictates that I ought to prevent harm, then OWA-PIP'' would permit me to prevent Charlie from killing and eating Albert regardless of their cultural norms. Because no cultural norms independent of my own have any significant

moral bearing on me, age-rel cannot provide any grounds for tolerance. As a result, it is clear not only that Bennigson's argument is invalid, but also that the very nature of age-rel continues to thwart grounds for tolerance regardless of any formulation of the noninterference principle. It is likely that the same will hold for any auxiliary principle, though this remains an open question. Regardless, even with Bennigson's addendums, vulgar relativism, rather than sustaining tolerance, has crippled it.

VI. Conclusion

The truth in vulgar relativism is just this: when pressed, it is unintelligible. It certainly cannot lay any legitimate claim to tolerance. Bennigson's argument represents an unusual attempt to give philosophical credibility to a popular and intuitive position; however, it still flounders in the general incoherence that plagues subjectivist accounts of knowledge and morality. Thus, while Bennigson's more robust conception of vulgar relativism offers a critical return against opponents such as Williams, vulgar relativism—"the anthropologist's heresy"—ultimately subverts attempts to justify a principle of cross-cultural tolerance. This, however, is not unique to vulgar relativism. Most, if not all, forms of subjectivism or social constructivism seem to trap themselves in inconsistency because nearly all evaluative claims require appeals to objective standards that are authoritative simply because they transcend any one particular view—a standard that any subjectivist account is forced, by nature, to reject.³

Despite this, relativistic ideas continue to permeate contemporary thought, both in academia and in popular culture. The reason for this is not puzzling. The desire to find an intuitive defense for values such as tolerance is a strong one. The allure of subjectivist accounts of knowledge and morality is that they seem to provide just that: a way, as Boghossian explains, that appears to "supply the philosophical resources with which to protect oppressed cultures from the charge of holding false or unjustified views" (130). In this sense, their appeal is understandable, but misguided. Tolerance is a desirable thing, but it must not be secured at the cost of objective moral truth—nor can it be, seeing as the objectivity required to evaluate the moral acts of others requires a standpoint unfettered by a subjective framework that, in lieu of empowering all points of view, enervates them.

³ Both Nagel and Boghossian have written extensively on this subject in their books *The Last Word* (1997) and *Fear of Knowledge* (2006) respectively.

Works Cited

- Bennigson, Thomas. "The Truth in Vulgar Relativism." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*. 96.3 (1999): 269-301.
- Boghossian, Paul. *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Nagel, Thomas. *The Last Word*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Williams, Bernard. *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.