Moral Relativism, Moral Isolationism

1. Introduction
Remember the four questions (of course there are others) we might want an ethical theory to answer for us:

i) Which acts are right and which are wrong? Which acts ought we to perform (understanding the "ought" as a moral "ought")?

ii) What makes a particular action right or wrong? What is it about the action that determines its moral status?

iii) How do we know what is right and wrong?

iv) What, if anything, motivates us to do what is right?

2. The Problem of Moral Relativism
A. Cultural Relativism
There are many different forms of moral relativism. The problem begins with the fact of moral diversity:

Moral diversity: Different cultures have different moral codes/values.

Consider a different, though related claim:

Moral conflict: Different cultures have conflicting moral codes/values.

Does moral diversity imply moral disagreement? Not obviously. Consider:

i) Different factual assumptions, e.g., regarding the mental life of animals.

ii) Different conventions for expressing underlying values.

iii) Different definitions of actions at issue, e.g., of euthanasia, rape, terrorism, self-defense.

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Cultural Relativists note that different cultures have opposing legal codes; what's legally right or wrong depends on one's society. Their idea is that we should understand what's morally right or wrong in a way analogous to legal right or wrong. The moral truths pertaining to a people is a function of the way those people have chosen to organize their lives. There is no universal moral truth.

Metaethical Moral Relativism (MMR). The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons. In other words, (i) in order to determine whether a moral claim of the form "Action A is wrong" is true or false, one must understand it to be elliptical for a claim of the form "According to moral framework M, action A is wrong," and (ii) there are legitimate and conflicting moral frameworks.¹

MMR is not the view that we should be sensitive to, and tolerant of, the practices of other cultures. Tolerance is a (first-order) normative demand, and not a meta-ethical claim.

MMR is not simply the view that there are no "universal (absolute) truths" in ethics, true for all peoples for all times. It may be that the objective moral truths vary over time (e.g., perhaps what is possible for humans varies over time, and what is morally required or permitted depends on what is possible for us); or perhaps there are objective moral truths that depend in important ways on one’s context, e.g., it is objectively true that one ought to abide by the just laws of one’s society. To grant this is not to be a moral or cultural relativist.

¹ See, e.g., the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Moral Relativism, section 2: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/#2
3. Some Consequences of Moral Relativism?

Cross-Cultural Criticism. Often we want to call some foreign custom or practice morally objectionable. But can we, if we are relativists?

Intra-Cultural Criticism. According to the relativist, there's a simple test for deciding what's right and wrong. Just consult the standards of your society. But normally we admit that our moral code is not perfect. On what basis can the relativist say this?

Intra-cultural Conflict: In every culture, there are disagreements about what counts as right or wrong. At best a relativist would have to pick some subset of values that members of the society endorse (which members? The dominant ones?), but why those as opposed to the others?

Moral Progress. How can there be moral progress if right means right-according-to-our-existing moral code? Moral progress happens when someone says, our existing moral code falls short of the moral truth; hence it needs to be adjusted. Again, is this compatible with relativism?

4. Deeper Problems?

A convinced relativist could try to bite the bullet: maybe we shouldn't engage in moral criticism; and maybe moral progress is just self-congratulation. But are there deeper problems with relativism?

Toleration an Objective Value? Sine relativists suggest that it's wrong to criticize another culture's values. This appears to result in a contradiction, for it seems that they are offering the rule of toleration as non-relative moral rule. One cannot both say that there are no objective moral values and that toleration is one.

Disappearance of Disagreement. Often relativists claim that we should "agree to disagree" with other cultures and leave them to their own perspectives. Problem is, if relativism is true then we don't disagree. Consider a parallel conversation: "I'm hungry." "Well, I disagree. I'm not hungry. Still, I respect your right to a different perspective." What different perspective? We're not disagreeing at all!

Really? Consider two forms of relativism: agent relativism and critic relativism. Note first that relativism also has individualistic forms (these are sometimes called “subjectivism”). Suppose Albert utters the sentence 'Hank ought to be a vegetarian' and Betty utters the sentence 'It's false that Hank ought to be a vegetarian'.

According to agent relativism, what Albert said is true just in case in relation to Hank's moral framework, he ought to be a vegetarian, and what Betty said is true just in case, in relation to Hank's moral framework, he ought not to be a vegetarian. So what Albert said is the denial of what Betty said: if Albert spoke truly then Betty spoke falsely, and vice versa. Thus, although agent relativism really is a form of relativism (because what morality requires of a person is dependent on that person's moral framework), it does not allow two apparently conflicting moral judgments to both be true.

According to critic relativism, on the other hand, what Albert said is true just in case in relation to Albert's moral framework, Hank ought to be a vegetarian, and what Betty said is true just in case in relation to Betty's moral framework, Hank ought not to be a vegetarian. So what Albert said is quite consistent with what Betty said: Albert and Betty might both have spoken truly. Critic relativism, then, does allow two apparently conflicting moral judgments to both be true.

But how can Albert and Betty both speak truly? After all, Betty utters a sentence that is the negation of the sentence that Albert utters, and surely a sentence and its negation can't both be true! Here we have to distinguish between a sentence that a person utters and what she says (or the proposition she asserts) by uttering that sentence. Sometimes what one says depends not only on the sentence one utters, but also on the context of utterance. And sometimes a person A who utters 'p' in context C1 and a person B who utters 'Not p' in context C2 can assert propositions that are both true. Example: suppose Albert is hungry and Betty is not hungry, and let 'p' be 'I am hungry'. Another example: suppose Albert is on a moving train with Xavier, and suppose Betty is on the platform, and let 'p' be 'Xavier is stationary'. (So the claim that a sentence and its negation can't both be true should be revised to read: a sentence and its negation can't both be true with respect to the same context.)
Taking Morality Seriously. Remember, what started us off is that there is disagreement and we feel troubled by it. The relativist says, you needn't feel troubled; just treat morality like a different kind of etiquette, albeit a kind people take much more seriously. But that's in a way the problem. How can we take it so seriously if morality is just a matter of conventional rules of conduct that we happen to have made up for ourselves?

5. Reconsidering Moral Objectivism
Perhaps we should take a second look at moral objectivism. The original impetus for relativism is the dramatic moral disagreement that we seemed to find between various cultures. But perhaps there is less disagreement than might seem.

Explaining Away: Remember society's customs are a function of more than their values. Their factual and religious beliefs, as well as their circumstances, matter too.

Survival Values: So at least some apparent differences in values can be explained away. But we can also make a positive argument: cultures must have some values in common, namely the ones without which a society would not be able to sustain itself.

However: moral objectivism has some of its own problems:

Moral skepticism: If our own cultural norms may well be deeply misguided, where do we begin to think about morality? How can we ever be sure we are tracking the moral truth? And if we can't be sure we're tracking the moral truth, on what basis could we begin to criticize others? It might seem that moral objectivism, then, provides no better basis for criticism than moral relativism.

"Queerness" of moral "facts": Physical facts are relatively straightforward: we know what it is for something to have weight, mass, color, etc. But sorts of things are "moral facts"? How does one detect a moral fact? If we live in a physical universe, is there any room in it for moral facts?

6. Questions to think about:
- What about genuine moral disagreements? Aren't there areas of moral life that cannot be understood relativistically (i.e., on the model of etiquette), but in which there is still disagreement? How should we think of disagreements over vegetarianism, religious toleration, sexism, homophobia, abortion? Is there an objective moral truth in these domains or not? How can we determine whether there is an objective moral fact about something or not? And if there is, how do we find the answer?
- Is it possible to draw a clear distinction between facts and values? E.g., in describing something as "beef" or "pork" or even more generally "meat", isn't one representing it from a particular evaluative viewpoint (e.g., from the point of view of a non-vegetarian)? In saying, "That's beef," is one making a purely factual claim? In saying, "That's a slice of dead cow," is one making a purely factual claim? What about, "That's a lie," or "He's a bigot"?
- Are there other arguments to support MMR besides arguments from moral diversity?