

Cultural Relativism and the Theory of Relativity

SEUNGBAE PARK

Division of General Studies, Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology, Republic of Korea

E-mail: nature@unist.ac.kr

Cornea (2012) argues that I (2011) was wrong to use the analogy between morality and motion to defend cultural relativism. I reply that the analogy can be used to clarify what cultural relativism asserts and how a cultural relativist can reply to the criticisms against it. Ockham's Razor favours the relativist view that there are no moral truths, and hence no culture is better than another. Contrary to what Cornea claims, cultural relativism does not entail that we cannot protect ourselves from those who attack us, and that the ruling of an international court lacks moral legitimacy.

Keywords: analogy, cultural relativism, cultural absolutism, moral truth, theory of relativity

INTRODUCTION

I (2011) used Einstein's theory of relativity to defend cultural relativism (henceforth simply 'relativism') against eight standard objections to it. Andrei Cornea (2012) launches incisive criticisms against my defense of relativism. He argues that my appeal to the analogy between morality and motion fails because they are dissimilar in certain respects. He also argues that some absurd consequences follow from the relativist idea that no culture is better than another. The absurd consequences are that we cannot protect ourselves when our enemies attack us, and that the ruling of an international court cannot be legitimate.

The aim of this paper is to defend my previous position against Cornea's critiques. I will explicate how the theory of relativity can be used in the debate over relativism, where the justification for relativism comes from, why it is that no culture is better than another, and why Cornea is wrong to attribute the aforementioned absurd consequences to relativism. It will become clear that cultural relativism remains unscathed vis-à-vis Cornea's critiques. Finally, I will argue that relativism is refuted when it is shown that moral truths exist, and that it is a Herculean task to establish the existence of moral truths.

TWO DIFFERENT USES OF ANALOGY

I (2011) claimed that morality is relative to a culture just as motion is relative to a frame of reference. An act must be evaluated with respect to a particular culture just as motion of a material object must be measured in relation to another material object. An object is in motion or at rest depending on what the frame of reference is. Similarly, an act is right or wrong depending on what culture is in relation to which the act is assessed. I also argued that no culture is better than another because there is no absolute moral standard, just as no material object is a better frame of reference than another because there is no absolute space.

Cornea (2012) objects that it is wrong to compare relativism to the theory of relativity because it is not so much relativism as absolutism that follows from the theory of relativity. How does absolutism follow from the theory of relativity?

I cannot imagine what else a moral analogue of the principle that *the speed of light is the same with respect to all frames of references* could be, if not the principle that for all cultures and individuals there must be a universal, identical, unattainable, equally distant, and unsurpassable absolute! (Cornea 2012: 35).

In other words, the special theory of relativity asserts that the speed of light is invariant across different frames of reference. The moral analogue of the speed of light is an absolute moral standard which can be employed across diverse cultures.

My response to Cornea's objection is to distinguish between two different uses of analogy: the justificatory use and the clarificatory use. The former involves an analogy used to *justify* a belief, and the latter to *clarify* a belief. Let me first offer an example of a justificatory use of analogy. A scientist may argue that a new drug will work on a human being on the grounds that it has worked on a mouse. His prediction about the effectiveness of the new drug on a human being is based on the analogy that a mouse and a human being are physiologically similar. In this example, the analogy is used to support the belief that the new drug will work on a human being. The prediction would lose its plausibility, if the analogy breaks down.

In contrast, an analogy can be used to clarify an obscure idea. For example, we can compare microscopic objects with macroscopic objects to illuminate what quantum mechanics says about microscopic objects. According to von Neumann and Dirac's version of quantum mechanics, to say that an electron is in the superposition of spin-up and spin-down is like saying that a car is simultaneously in all seven possible states: the first gear, second gear, third gear, fourth gear, fifth gear, reverse gear, and neutral (Lockwood 1996: 159–160). The probability that the car is in the first gear is $1/7$. So is the probability that it is in the second gear, third gear, and so on. The car is not definitely in one of the seven states when we do not observe it. When we observe it, however, it lapses into one of the seven states with 100% probability. Analogously, the electron does not definitely have the property of spin-up or the property of spin-down when we do not measure its spin state. It simultaneously has both the property of spin-up and the property of spin-down. The probability that it has the property of spin-up is $1/2$. So is the probability that it has the property of spin-down. When we measure its spin state, however, it comes to have the property of spin-up or the property of spin-down with 100% probability. In this example, the analogy between the electron and the car is used not to support but to explicate the illusive idea that an electron is in the superposition of spin-up and spin-down. The analogy is useful insofar as it achieved the purpose of shedding light on the superposition principle. It is inappropriate to respond to this analogy by saying that the analogy fails because we can get on the car, but not on the electron. To say so is to miss the point of the analogy. The plausibility of the superposition principle does not decrease, even if the analogy between the electron and the car breaks down. After all, the superposition principle can be justified without any mention of the car.

Let's turn to the analogy (Park 2011) that morality and motion are similar. The justificatory use of the analogy is problematic, as Cornea points out. But it seems to me that the clarificatory use of it is not. The analogy is useful to the extent that it illuminates what relativism asserts and how a relativist would respond to criticisms against it. Moreover, all

of my previous eight replies to the standard criticisms against relativism remain unscathed, even if they are severed from the analogy. The following example will illustrate how the eight replies can stand without the analogy.

Let's consider the example of the serial killer discussed by Pojman, me, and Cornea. Relativism asserts that cultural approval is what makes an action right. Pojman accuses relativism of having the despicable consequence that a serial killer "would be morally pure in raping and killing innocents simply by virtue of forming a little coterie" (2008: 18). The idea is that the little coterie would approve of the serial killer's heinous behaviour, so on the relativist account, his behaviour is moral. Our intuition says, however, that it is immoral. Therefore, the approval of the small group of criminals does not make it right, and relativism is false. So argues Pojman.

In order to diffuse Pojman's objection, I invoked the analogy between motion and morality. In physics, you can say that a car is travelling at any velocity you like, "insofar as you appeal to the right frame of reference" (Park 2011: 166). Imagine that a car travels at 50 km/h with respect to the ground. You can say that it is travelling at 30 km/h with respect to a bicycle, 0 km/h with respect to another car, and so forth. You can even say that the car is moving at 100 km/h, insofar as you add that the frame of reference is another car moving at 50 km/h with respect to the ground in the opposite direction. Similarly, I contended, a relativist "would cheerfully grant that any act can be made moral by forming a culture that approves of it" (2011: 166). I added, though, that the serial killer's behaviour is wrong with respect to a non-criminal culture.

Cornea objects that my analogy would hold "*if, and only if the car is moving by inertia*" (2012: 36). But on close examination the car is not moving by inertia "since it is being acted upon by the engine, the inertial forces, friction, and air resistance" (2012: 36). Moreover, you cannot reduce the fuel consumption of the car simply by saying that the car is at rest with respect to another car. Consequently, it is "not the ground but the car that is *really* traveling at 50 km/h" (Cornea 2012: 36). In addition, you cannot say that the car is travelling at any speed you like, even if it is moving by inertia and even if you choose an appropriate inertial frame of reference, because the special theory of relativity maintains that nothing travels faster than light. You can choose the velocity of the car only within the limit of the speed of light. Thus, in physics, a material object moving by inertia can be said to move at any velocity you like below the speed of light, insofar as you provide an appropriate inertial frame of reference.

Cornea's preceding can be defused by replacing the example of the car and the ground with the new example of two stars. When two stars move with respect to each other, there is no fact of the matter as to which star is really moving. It is wrong to say that the first star has an engine using the fuel and the second star does not, so the first star is really moving and the second car is at rest. Thus, Cornea's criticism does not apply to this new example.

How about Cornea's criticism that the car cannot travel faster than light? I insist that the relativist belief stands that we are right about the morality of a certain action insofar as we appeal to the culture which commends it. After all, the plausibility of my reply to Pojman is independent of the analogy. I can recast my criticism against Pojman as follows: cultural approval is what makes an action right, so an act can be made moral simply by creating a culture which praises it. This new reply to Pojman is free of the analogy. Ironically, Cornea should accept this new reply, given that he embraces the relativist thesis that "cultural approval is what makes an act right, and cultural disapproval is what makes an act wrong" (Cornea 2012: 39).

So far, I have argued that the analogy between motion and morality can be used to elucidate how a relativist can reply to Pojman, that my reply to Pojman can be recast without the analogy, and that demolishing the analogy does not amount to a refutation of my reply to Pojman. The same is true of my seven other replies. They do not fall, even if they are purged of the analogy. Due to lack of space, however, I leave to readers the task of exploring how the seven other replies survive Cornea's critique of the analogy.

OCKHAM'S RAZOR

Why should we accept relativism? Where does its justification come from, if not from the theory of relativity? I (2011: 169) invoked the principle of economy to establish the epistemic superiority of relativism to absolutism. Absolutism postulates the existence of absolute moral standards, whereas relativism does not. Yet, absolutism accounts for no more moral phenomena than relativism. Therefore, we should choose relativism over absolutism.

Some absolutists claim that there are universal moral rules, such as the rule that one ought not to torture babies to death for fun. I objected, however, that this putative universal moral rule can be accommodated not only by absolutism but also by relativism. For an absolutist, it is an absolute moral rule. For a relativist, however, it is not a culture-independent moral rule but merely a moral rule endorsed by all cultures around the world. Hence, Ockham's Razor enjoins us to accept relativism and reject absolutism.

In response, Cornea objects that there is no reason for using Ockham's Razor in ethics because ethics is not a science. Ockham's Razor is usable in science, but not in ethics:

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)

Cornea does not explicitly state what the cost of using Ockham's Razor in ethics is. From the context, it seems that he takes relativism to have the repugnant implications that we cannot defend ourselves from our enemies, and that we have no legitimate basis for establishing and operating an international court. Thus, employing Ockham's Razor comes at the cost of these loathsome practical implications.

My response to Cornea's objection is to point out that the origin of Ockham's Razor is not science but philosophy. It was propounded by a scholastic philosopher, William of Ockham, who used it to reject Plato's Theory of Forms. In my view, Ockham's Razor comes into play whenever we disagree over a metaphysical issue regardless of whether the domain of the dispute is science, ethics, religion, or any other field. The present dispute between relativism and absolutism is over a metaphysical issue, given that it is over whether absolute moral standards exist or not. Therefore, it is justifiable to invoke Ockham's Razor in this context.

If you are still not satisfied with this conclusion, imagine a dispute between a skeptic and a shaman who believes that a ghost exists. The skeptic contends that we do not have to postulate the existence of the ghost to explain phenomena in the world, and the principle of economy dictates that we should not believe that the ghost exists. The shaman replies that superstition is not a science, and Ockham's Razor is misplaced in superstition. It follows that it is wrong for the skeptic to imitate scientists at the cost of disbelieving that the ghost exists. In my view, there is no relevant difference between the shaman's response to the skeptic and Cornea's response to me.

REPUGNANT IMPLICATIONS

I claimed that no culture is better than another. Cornea objects that my view has the disturbing consequence that we have no legitimate basis for protecting ourselves when aggressive people attack us:

Moreover, as I have said, the issue is of practical importance as well: for, if one should refrain from condemning the murder of millions in the Holocaust, the Soviet Gulag, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Khmer Rouge's death camps or in Africa's internecine wars, on the pretext that those cultures were not any worse than ours, how could one protect oneself, one's own community and humanity as a whole against a re-enactment of such heinous acts? (Cornea 2012: 31)

For example, when the Nazis attacked Jews, Jews as relativists should have tolerated the Nazis because Nazi culture was no worse than Jewish culture, and because relativism advised them to tolerate people of other cultures.

In my view, a relativist would point out that the Nazis should not have attacked Jews in the first place because Nazi culture was no better than Jewish culture. Suppose that the Nazis were absolutists, believing that the Nazi culture was better than the Jewish culture, and that as a result, they attacked Jews. What could Jews do as relativists? Should they simply tolerate the Nazis, as Cornea claims? My answer is no. Jews as relativists were entitled to fight back. After all, when Jews counterattack against the Nazis, Jewish culture is no worse than Nazi culture. Besides, for a thoroughgoing relativist, the principle of tolerance is relative to a culture just like other moral rules. If the Jewish culture does not include the principle of tolerance, they are not morally obliged to tolerate the Nazis. Thus, it is wrong for Cornea to attribute to relativism the disagreeable claim that we as relativists cannot protect ourselves from belligerent people.

Suppose that an international court sentences Nazi war criminals to death. Cornea thinks that relativism has the dire consequence that the ruling of the international court is not legitimate:

What about the rulings of the International Courts? In order to enjoy moral and judicial legitimacy, their standards of justice must be either those of a universal culture or, at least, of a better culture than the one whose members were put on trial. But since *there is neither a universal culture nor a better culture than another*, as the relativist creed proclaims, none of these rulings can be legitimate and right. So they have to be disposed of (Cornea 2012: 41 footnote).

In other words, if no culture is better than another, the rulings against Nazi war criminals are not legitimate. Our intuition says, however, that they are legitimate. Therefore, a culture can be better than another, and relativism is false. So says Cornea.

In my view, we need to be precise about what relativism implies concerning the ruling of the international court. Relativism does not entail that the ruling of an international court cannot be right. It rather says that the ruling of the international court is right or wrong with respect to a culture. For example, the ruling against the Nazi war criminals is legitimate in relation to non-Nazi cultures but illegitimate with reference to the Nazi culture. You and I strongly believe that the ruling is justifiable because we use non-Nazi cultures as a frame of reference when we evaluate the ruling. Indeed, all the cultures in the world may accept the ruling of the international court. In such circumstances, the ruling is right with respect to all cultures in the world. It is not well-appreciated in the ethics literature that relativism allows "the possibility that all the cultures in the world jointly endorse some moral rules" (Park 2011:

163). Thus, it is unfair for Cornea to ascribe to relativism the unacceptable claim that the Nuremberg Trials of the Nazi war criminals “lacked the moral legitimacy” (Cornea 2012: 30).

MORAL TRUTHS

I argued that a “culture would be better than another if it were closer to the absolutely right standard than the other were, but there is no such thing as an absolutely right standard, so no culture can be better than another” (2011: 161). An absolutist would retort that there are absolute moral rules. In fact, Schick and Vaughn (2010: 364–365) argue that certain statements – that equals must be treated equally, and that unnecessary suffering is wrong – are universal moral rules. These moral rules are self-evident. All rational human beings would immediately assent to them, even if they belong to different cultures. We can assess cultures in terms of how close they are to the rules. Consequently, a culture can be better than another.

I reply, however, that from the fact that all rational human beings agree to the foregoing two moral principles, it does not follow that they are absolute moral standards. As we noted earlier, “relativism is compatible with the existence of an intersection among different cultures” (Park 2011: 163). In other words, the fact that all rational human beings of diverse cultures take the aforementioned two moral rules to be self-evident is compatible with the relativist suggestion that all the actions falling under the moral rules are right in relation to all the cultures in the world. It is yet to be proved that the moral rules hold independently of culture, i. e., it is an open question whether they are absolute moral standards or not. Relativism is not falsified simply by the existence of moral rules endorsed by all the cultures around the world.

What is an absolute moral standard? Absolutism asserts that an action is moral or immoral, depending on whether it meets an absolute moral standard or not, and that cultural approval or disapproval of it does not make any difference as to whether it is moral or immoral. I stated that an “absolutely right standard transcends all cultures in the world, so an action might be right even if all the cultures disapprove of it, and it might be wrong even if all the cultures approve of it” (Park 2011: 160). For example, on the absolutist account, the ruling of an international court might be moral even if all the cultures in the world reject it, and the ruling might be immoral even if all the cultures in the world accept it. I did not say more about what absolute moral standards are.

Let me develop in this paper the notion of an absolute moral standard. I propose that an absolute moral standard is nothing but a moral truth. A truth transcends all cultures in the world, i. e., it is culture-independent. To take an example, it is true that the earth is round independently of a culture. It is not the case that it is true with respect to Korean culture but false with respect to American culture, or vice versa. It is true even if all cultures disapprove of it. It is false that the earth is flat even if all cultures approve of this belief. A descriptive statement is true or false depending on whether or not the world is as the statement says it is, not depending on whether a culture approves or disapproves of it. The truth-value of a descriptive statement is culture-independent. On the absolutist account, a moral truth is like a descriptive truth. They are all rendered true by worldly truth-makers.

Let’s examine the putative universal moral rule that unnecessary suffering is wrong. Is this moral rule true in the way it is true that the earth is round? The moral statement would be true if the world is as the statement says it is. In order for the world to be as the statement says it is, the property of being wrong should exist in the world. If it does not, then the statement is false. In another previous paper (Park 2012: 90–92) I argued at length that the property of being wrong does not dwell in the universe, and hence that there are no moral truths. Let me

summarize my previous argument here. Imagine that there are two groups of people whose perceptive faculties work flawlessly. One group of people says that eating pork is morally right, whereas the other group of people says that it is morally wrong. To say that the property of being wrong exists in the action of eating pork means that the first group does not perceive what the second group does. By hypothesis, however, the perceptive faculty of both groups works properly. If you believe that moral truths exist, you owe us an account of why one party fails to observe what the other party observes.

Why is it self-evident that unnecessary suffering is wrong? In my view, it is self-evident because it is analytically true as opposed to synthetically true. An analytic statement contains no information about the world. It is true, if true, solely by definitions of words in it (Hung 1997: 134–135). Consider the statement that an unmarried man is a bachelor. The statement is true because the two expressions ‘unmarried man’ and ‘bachelor’ are synonymous. We do not have to observe the world to see that the statement is true. It would remain true even if all bachelors get married. In that sense, the truth-value of an analytic statement is independent of how the world is. In contrast, the truth-value of a synthetic statement is dependent upon how the world is. Consider again the statement that the earth is round. It is true by virtue of the way the world is. It could conceivably become false, say, if the earth were to collide with a huge meteorite. Thus, we have to observe the world in order to determine whether a synthetic statement is true or false. In my view, the moral rule that unnecessary suffering is wrong is analytically true just like the statement that an unmarried man is a bachelor. We can immediately see that it is true, once we notice that the two phrases ‘unnecessary suffering’ and ‘wrong suffering’ are synonymous. We do not have to observe the world to determine whether it is true or false. It would turn out to be a synthetic statement, if an absolutist provides an example of necessary but wrong suffering or an example of unnecessary but right suffering. I claim that undertaking to find such an example is just as pointless as undertaking to find an example of a married bachelor.

VAGUE TERM

Pojman (2008) contends that the term ‘culture’ is vague because it is not clear how large a group of people must be in order to constitute a culture. I (2011) replied that any number can do, just as any number of material objects can jointly serve as a single frame of reference in physics. Cornea points out that it is not clear what properties a group of people should have in common in order to count as belonging to the same culture:

But what is the analogue of “being at rest in relation to each other”, when we are speaking about a group of people that are supposed to form a common culture? To live in the same area? To speak the same language? To have the same religion or the same habits and laws? To have all these traits together? No one can tell. (Cornea 2012: 33)

The target of Cornea’s critique here is the analogy between morality and motion. In physics, it is clear what condition is required for a group of material objects to constitute a single frame of reference, whereas in ethics, it is not clear what is required for a group of people to form a single culture. Cornea’s critique bolsters Pojman’s charge that the key term ‘culture’ is vague. Consequently, relativism is a theoretically immature doctrine.

My response to this line of objection against relativism is twofold. First, if relativism is deplorable because it contains the vague term ‘culture’, so are Cornea’s position and all the cultural studies. Cornea’s position is that “we effectively can compare some different cultural

forms belonging to different cultures, and reasonably decide which of them morally prevails” (Cornea 2012: 39), and that “some cultures are better than others” (Cornea 2012: 40). Note that the vague term ‘culture’ also figures in Cornea’s statements. Thus, Cornea’s criticism that ‘culture’ is not a well-defined predicate backfires on his own position. What goes down is not only his position but also all the cultural studies. All the social scientists who are engaged in cultural studies would have to answer Cornea’s interesting question: What does it take for a group of people to form a culture? To live in the same area? To speak the same language?

Second, as well-appreciated in the philosophy of science literature, a vague predicate is “usable provided it has clear cases and clear counter-cases” (van Fraassen 1980: 16). For example, the predicate ‘observable’ is viable, although vague, because it is clearly applicable to a chair, but not to an electron. Likewise, the term ‘culture’ is usable, although vague, as long as there are clear cases of culture and clear counter-cases of culture.

CONCLUSION

Cornea’s attack on the analogy between morality and motion is brilliant. His attack, however, demolishes none of my eight replies to criticisms against relativism. Besides, the analogy can still be used to clarify relativism. The justification for relativism derives not from the analogy but from Ockham’s Razor. Ockham’s Razor can be invoked in ethics insofar as a metaphysical issue is under dispute in it. From the relativist thesis that no culture is better than another, it does not follow that we cannot protect ourselves from our enemies, or that the ruling of an international court cannot be moral, contrary to what Cornea claims.

Let me emphasize that relativism is refuted not by the existence of moral rules endorsed by all the cultures but by the existence of absolute moral standards. I proposed in this paper that absolute moral standards are nothing but moral truths, given that both absolute moral standards and moral truths are culture-independent. Finally, I appealed to another previous paper of mine (2012) that moral truths do not exist because moral properties do not inhabit the universe. Since moral truths do not exist, no culture can be better than another. I conclude that cultural relativism is a better theory of morality than cultural absolutism.

Received 7 November 2013

Accepted 10 February 2014

References

1. Cornea, A. 2012. “Relativity and Relativism: On a Failed Analogy”, *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 9(1): 29–42.
2. Hung, E. H.-C. 1997. *The Nature of Science: Problems and Perspectives*. California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
3. Lockwood, M. 1996. “Many-Minds Interpretations of Quantum Mechanics”, *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 47(2): 159–188.
4. Park, S. 2011. “Defence of Cultural Relativism”, *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 8(1): 159–170.
5. Park, S. 2012. “Against Moral Truths”, *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 9(1): 179–194.
6. Pojman, L. 2008. “Who’s to Judge What’s Right or Wrong?” in *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Moral Issues*, ed. S. Stephen. 11th ed. McGraw-Hill / Dushkin.
7. Schick, T.; Vaughn, L. 2010. *Doing Philosophy: An Introduction through Thought Experiments*. 4th ed. California: Mayfield Publishing Company.
8. van Fraassen, B. 1980. *The Scientific Image*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.