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Cultural Ethical Relativism

Thus far in our Philosophy studies, we have covered the ultimate struggle for pre-Socratic philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes: Does simplicity really live up to its meaning, or does the attempt on a simplistic origin make matters more complex? With the emergence of the Sophists, instead of contemplating about the ultimate source of thought, the Sophists focused on moral behavior, contrary to the pre-Socratic attempt of a unified conception of the cosmos. One of such Sophists, Protagoras, stated, “man is the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not.” This ultimate standard of judgment introduced relativism, and concluded that “knowledge is relative to each person.” With a conservative mindset, Protagoras believed “…that laws and moral rules are based on custom, not nature,” thus concluding there is some cultural and ethical involvement (Stumpf, 28-29). The question that comes to mind nowadays is whether or not this Cultural Ethical Relativism (CER) is applicable, meaning the debate on its true meaning. In this paper, I will discuss why I do not agree to CER.

Before I discuss on why I oppose CER, there has to be a reason behind why one would favor, or rather believe in CER. Using Don Berkich’s Professional Ethics handout on CER, he denotes two primary principles of CER: 1) Morality is relative to a given culture; and 2) It is wrong to judge the moral practices of another culture. Using principle 1, Berkich provides a cultural difference argument that those—in Berkich’s case, “CERtists”—find favorable in such disposition:

1. Different cultures have different moral beliefs, practices, and traditions.
2. If different cultures have different moral beliefs, practices, and traditions, then there is no universal moral truth.
3. If there is no universal moral truth, then morality is relative to a given culture.

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∴ 4. Morality is relative to a given culture.

Now let’s explore this argument into further detail. Although the conclusion seems to validate CERtists’ prose, the overall argument is unsound: the second premise is clearly false. More specifically, Berkich points out the dispute between whether the earth was flat, and those who thought it was round. Just because one of the two “cultures” were wrong, we cannot generalize there is no universal moral truth based on indifferences (Berkich, *Professional Ethics*, philosophy.tamucc.edu).

Another reason to point out the falsehood against CER is regarding ethical terms; we have to evaluate each term on an individual basis, not as a whole. Because the culture/society has its own moral standard, stating the entire society is morally incorrect due to nuances between individuals within the society is unjust. Furthermore, there then comes to question what seems to be unethical beliefs that are held by whole societies; can those beliefs be endorsed? Though examples such as the apartheid in South Africa to Pol Pot’s genocide on the Cambodian people, it cannot be endorsed for this specific reason: “since cultural ethical relativism requires us to deny that moral sense, it is not an acceptable account of ethics” (Mullen).

The next topic to consider is conflicts within a society. From CER—assuming to say it is true—the majority is always true, thus the standards in this specific society is dictated from the majority, not as a whole. Therefore, we can conclude that the so-called minority will always be wrong; furthermore, anyone who seeks moral reform is wrong due to the assumption the minority would acquire such reform (Mullen). As obvious as it sounds, this is not right. We have seen this all throughout our history; in more recent accounts, gay rights. Those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) are the minority to rights such as marriage. Just because there’s a relative small number of LGBT in comparison to the United States’ population, they deserve the same rights as heterosexuals, which counter-argues their reform for marriage rights not existing due for being the minority.

In conclusion, in terms of ethics within a culture, we have to take account of morally acceptances on an individual basis. By assuming an entire society holds an ultimate moral standard, it creates an uncertainty within the society because it is too generalized. There will always be discourses within a society, but if CER were to exist, the smaller group—the minority—would always be wrong, which is clearly incorrect. From studying CER, I can see why Socrates and Plato did not agree to Protagoras’ claim on man is the measurement of all things. Protagoras’ notion that ethical propositions depends on the culture’s contemplation is too radical to take into consideration.

Works Cited

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Stumpf, Samuel. *Socrates and Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy.* New York: McGraw Hill, 2008. Print.