

Chapter 1

Introduction

Obi-Wan: What I told you was true, from a certain point of view.

Luke: A certain point of view?

Obi-Wan: Luke, you will find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our point of view.¹

This kind of casual relativism about morality — the idea that things ‘depend greatly on our point of view’ — is deeply embedded in our culture. When we turn to survey the wide array of life practices adopted by people in our society and across the globe, ‘it’s all relative’ is a cry not restricted just to issues of taste or preference but also applied to questions of culture or morality. Just as the early anthropologists were staggered by the degree of diversity present in humanity, the culturally diverse state we are in encourages an attitude of relativism, at least on the part of some. This relativism with respect to moral diversity finds various expressions — things are ‘true for them’, we ‘shouldn’t judge others’, ‘no view’s better than any other’. Moral relativism holds to the possibility that people can have different but equally good moral lives. But there is a countervailing view of other cultures or moralities also present in society. Some phenomena in history and in today’s world produce a different reaction. ‘What they did was wrong, pure and simple’ ‘pure evil’ ‘beyond the pale’ — labels often applied to genocide, for example. These two attitudes, one of a relativist suspension of judgement, and another demanding the imposition of judgement, are in conflict both within and between individuals and societies. How can these two attitudes be combined (if indeed they can), and where does the line lie between acceptance and criticism?

Approaching this question from a concern with relativism, as I will, raises several issues straightaway. For relativism has often

[1] George Lucas, *Return of the Jedi*.

been thought obviously false, or pernicious, or both. Controversy continues between those who see relativism as straightforwardly true, and those who see it as patently false, and has done since the debate between Socrates and Protagoras described in the *Theaetetus*. This debate seems to have become more entrenched of late, as resistance to postmodernism has prompted strident criticism of any kind of 'subjectivism'. Whilst we might meet relativism in our everyday life, and whilst it does not lack for theoretical defenders, it remains nevertheless a dirty word to many contemporary analytical philosophers.² To get anywhere near the bottom of this debate requires first a distinguishing of types of relativism and an explanation of the ways we might come to see things as 'relative'. Second, and relatedly, there needs to be an examination of what is at issue between the relativist and his/her opponent. Lastly, there remains a question as to whether a successful defence of some variety of relativism can be mounted.

I aim to provide a fresh contribution to this debate. My aim is to examine some of the conceptual issues and present relativism, or at least one variety of relativism, in a new way. In so doing I clarify the relations between relativity and those elements which are often taken to be its opposites — universality and objectivity. The discussion probes some of the complexities involved, and aims to suggest and justify a distinctive and overlooked relativist position. I then go on to examine some of the implications of such a proposal for political philosophy, and in particular liberalism.

Thus, in addition to the controversy over the feasibility of relativism, my work enters another controversy about the nature and desirability of what has been termed 'political liberalism'. The character and justification of the liberal response to diversity has been the centrepiece of another debate in recent years. Can liberalism provide an account of how to deal with diversity and, equally important, can it provide a justification for that account? I aim to clarify the relationship between relativism and these two questions, concluding that relativism is important to both and can make an especially significant contribution to the latter.

Relativism and the political liberal response to diversity are related in a number of ways. As I have already mentioned briefly, a link is often posited between relativism and cultural diversity. Is diversity an argument for relativism — either direct proof, or a phenomenon that is best explained by relativism? Relativists have advanced both of these theses over the years, and in this

[2] The philosophers on both sides that I am thinking of here are quoted and discussed at length at the beginning of chapter two, where I discuss conceptions of relativism in much more detail.

book I will say something about such positions. Furthermore, relativism has been used to justify an attitude of tolerance to diverse moralities — an attitude that has been turned against relativism by its critics as sanctioning an ‘anything goes’ approach to morality. Thus, I need to address the question of whether relativism results in liberal tolerance and neutrality, nihilism, or neither. Another link between political and moral theory here is the involvement of a metaethical theory often associated with liberalism — reflective equilibrium. Initially introduced by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, the method of reflective equilibrium constitutes an attempt to get our moral views in order, so that our judgements are supported by theories, and these theories are in turn supported by our judgements. This emphasis on coherence, I suggest, is helpful in a defence of relativism.

The political component of the book also arises from my conviction that relativism is supportive of contemporary liberal claims concerning the nature of moral justification. Relativism is not opposed to liberal commitments, nor need it undermine them; instead it can, and does, serve to underwrite contemporary arguments for liberal principles. Thus, the concern with political philosophy is motivated by the need to clarify what follows from relativism, and to discuss the relationship between relativism and cultural diversity. I examine this relationship through the lens of contemporary liberalism, because contemporary ‘political’ liberalism is focused on the need to respond to this diversity. Introducing questions of political theory in the second part of the book also allows me to respond to the fear of relativism expressed by many thinkers.

From the discussion of these issues arise my two key claims. First, *metaethical relativism provides a plausible account of moral justification*. Second, *metaethical relativism is not only consistent with the claims of contemporary liberalism, but underpins those claims*. To explain and offer support for these two claims, the book is split into two parts. The first of these concerns the defence of relativism and the nature of the debate between relativism and universalism. The second concerns contemporary liberalism and its relationship with relativism. The two parts are interdependent. If I cannot show in the first part that relativism is a plausible account of moral justification then the question of its implications for liberalism is, in a sense, void. Part of the plausibility of relativism, I suggest, lies in its ability to support and cohere with plausible moral and political principles. If relativism stands in opposition to liberalism then this opposition may provide a good reason to

reject it, so that the project of the first half may still fail.³ The question of the plausibility of relativism cannot be separated from its implications for our moral life, and political principles (including liberal ones) are important features of people's moral lives. Before moving into an outline of the structure of my argument, I want to set its key issues in context by giving initial characterisations of the touchstones of the book: relativism and political liberalism.

Relativism

Before outlining the structure of my argument for relativism, an attempt must be made here to clarify what relativism is, in particular the kind of relativism I am primarily concerned with. The classic definition of relativism takes it as denying that in any particular sphere of inquiry there are truths that hold regardless of circumstances or viewpoint. This might sound a purely negative definition, but relativism posits the alternative that truths⁴ are 'relative' in some sense. I do not intend to offer any precise taxonomy of relativism here. There are already many catalogues of the way in which relativism has been applied to a number of different areas of thought. For example Harré and Krausz (1996), distinguish between four senses. 'Semantic relativism' makes the claim that meaning is language-relative. 'Ontological relativism' is the view that existence is relative to conceptual systems. 'Aesthetic relativism' holds that judgements are relative to culture or epoch. 'Moral relativism' claims that morality is relative to framework or culture. An attempt to discuss all the typologies of relativism, and to determine where certain thinkers sit within them, would be a lengthy and problematic exercise. The common core of these catalogues of relativism lies in the view that truth is 'relative-to' certain features of the terrain in each of these dimensions of thought. Thus, Kuhn and Feyerabend would maintain that there are many different and incommensurable scientific paradigms (Kuhn, 1970, Feyerabend, 1975). Anthropologists such as Winch have maintained that even logic is 'only intelligible in the context of ways of living and modes of social life' (Winch, 1958, 100). I am not concerned here to advance either of these positions. Instead, my analysis centres on the claim that *morality* is relative.

[3] I say 'may' because it isn't obvious that we should reject a plausible account of morality because it has unpalatable consequences. Nevertheless, the charge that relativism undermines strong commitments to liberal ideas such as human rights has been used as a reason to reject it, as I shall discuss later.

[4] Or justifications, as I go on to note in chapter two.

The relativism I will discuss concerns morality or ethics, but even here I will draw a distinction between ethical and metaethical relativism. Ethical relativism is a normative project, an attitude or principle intended to guide our actions in dealing with diversity. Metaethical relativism is instead a position about the nature of morality. Metaethical relativists have variously taken truth or justification in morality to be relative to cultures, moral frameworks, or systems of moral rules, and I discuss these variants in chapter two. In particular, metaethical relativism specifies what we understand as moral justification, how it proceeds and what we can expect of it. As I will go on to show, the kind of relativism I advocate has links with conceptual relativism, which makes judgements relative to conceptual schemes or frameworks. However, I do not examine the question of whether relativism is appropriate only for ethics, or should instead be adopted as a general theory covering all areas of thought. Any in-depth discussion of all these different relativisms lies outside the scope of this work, and I want to suggest that relativism about morality can be conceived of independently of any grand relativist plan.

Political Liberalism

Recent years have seen a turn in liberalism towards questions of how to respond to diversity within society. It ought to be made clear that I examine liberalism in this book not as an economic regime, or an analysis of real-world states, but instead as a distinctive political philosophy. Within this political philosophy, a concern for the priority of justice has been augmented by a recognition of diversity in ways of life or 'conceptions of the good' within a single society. In this book, I pick out and examine a particular strand of liberal thought that has been termed 'political liberalism'. This kind of liberalism has been set out by, amongst others, Brian Barry, Charles Larmore and John Rawls. The approach aims not just to reach a stable liberal consensus amongst diverse groups in society, but also makes this diversity central to the argument. In so doing, liberalism needs to characterise or explicate diversity in 'conceptions of the good', just as relativism does. Once I have attempted a defence of relativism as a plausible metaethical theory, I apply relativism in an examination of political liberalism. I think relativism holds special relevance for the claims political liberals make about the nature of reasonable diversity. A similar claim has been made before, by some of liberalism's most vehement opponents — for example Unger's claim

that liberalism rests on the ‘subjectivity of values’ (Unger, 1976).⁵ As I have noted, many liberals will resist any association of relativism with liberalism, for they believe that relativism undermines the primacy of our moral commitments (Dworkin 1996, Nagel 1997). However, my analysis suggests that a more open commitment to a theory of moral justification would help counter criticisms of political liberalism.

Outline of the Argument

Having indicated my main goals, I now want to set out an overview of my argument.

In chapter two I focus on contemporary defences of relativism. I begin by expanding the distinction between moral and metaethical relativism. Whilst the first aims to be action-guiding, the second constitutes a theory about the nature of morality and especially moral justification. I concentrate on this type of relativism, identifying it with the key claim that ‘there is no single justified morality’. I examine the defences of this claim offered by David Wong and Gilbert Harman, before briefly discussing the views of Richard Rorty. Rorty, whilst continually disavowing the epithet ‘relativist’, nevertheless makes key relativist claims. I evaluate the ability of these views to explain aspects of our moral experience – our reaction to moral horror, moral disagreement, and demands for moral truth. I argue that whilst all of these thinkers can provide answers to these questions, they do so at too great a cost. In particular, neither Wong nor Harman’s approach allows us to criticise horrific moralities without importing too great a degree of universalism into their theory. In the course of my analysis, I identify two further problems for a relativist account. The first is the problem of theory choice indeterminacy – summed up in Harrison’s charge that if relativism is correct, we are left in a position where ‘heads I’ll be a Kantian, tails I’ll be a utilitarian’ (Harrison, 1979, 135). The second problem concerns moral criticism. Relativism must explain what our attitude should be towards equally justified but incompatible moralities, allowing

[5] The similarity between Unger’s ‘subjectivity of values’ and relativism lies in the way that both are thought to undermine strongly universalist or objectivist accounts of values. Strauss makes a similar claim about liberalism being in crisis because it has abandoned its absolutism (Strauss, 1961, 140 quoted in Fishkin 1984, 156). Fishkin argues that the only way to avoid the conclusion that ‘liberalism self-destructs as a coherent moral ideology’ is to achieve a change ‘in our common expectations about the character of an objective morality’ (Fishkin, 1984, 157). In some ways, I conceive of this book as engaged in an activity of this kind, an examination of both moral experience and liberalism.

us to not only criticise moralities which are 'beyond the pale' but also those that are equally justified.

Chapter three introduces and analyses the opponents of relativism; those theorists who advocate what I term universalist accounts of morality. Thus, they affirm that in some sense there *is* a single justified morality. Thomas Nagel explicates this as some moral reasons having universal force. Jürgen Habermas holds that discourse about justice presupposes some 'inescapable' commitments to a moral core. Stuart Hampshire makes the moral universals more contingent, and grounds them in human nature or human rationality. I move on to identify a new approach which I term 'contingent universalism' that relies on the ability of humanity to converge around common and hence universal norms. All of these approaches are problematic to varying extents, often because of their uneasy relationship with moral diversity. An examination of contingent universalism also shows how close some universalist approaches are to relativist ones. Contingent universalism can vary in the link it posits between claim (1) that people's morals converge on a moral core and claim (2) that the moral core is universal in status.

Having criticised universalism, and existing contemporary defences of relativism, chapter four turns to the method of reflective equilibrium to try to solve some of the problems identified with relativist approaches. I take the method, as sketched by John Rawls and expanded by Norman Daniels, as an example of a coherentist approach to moral justification. After analysing the nature of the reflective equilibrium methodology, I argue that one interpretation of the coherence methodology supports a kind of relativism which I term 'coherence relativism', and begin the task of discussing how such an approach can cope with the features of our moral life that I identified in chapter two. I indicate how coherence relativism can obtain objectivity and how, drawing on a variety of sources such as Bernard Williams and Samuel Scheffler, coherence relativism suggests an answer to questions of theory choice indeterminacy.

Chapter five extends the work of the previous chapter by looking at how coherence relativism can deal with further elements of our moral life against which I tested contemporary relativist approaches. I begin by looking at the kind of criticism a relativist could offer of other moralities. I draw a distinction between the justification of a morality and the application of it. My argument is that the relativist, much like the universalist, can apply her morality even where it cannot be justified, though ideally we should aim for justification to underpin the application of our

morality. However, whilst relativism allows people to criticise, compelling justification for that criticism will not always be available. I then discuss in detail how the relativist might be able to respond to horrific moralities. As part of this discussion, I examine implications for the idea of tolerance. Whilst some people take it as axiomatic that we can identify relativism with tolerance — indeed, that relativism requires us to tolerate too much — others have dismissed the view that relativism can have any implications for toleration as ‘absurd’ (notably Bernard Williams). I argue that relativism can support an argument for toleration when conjoined with the view that moral justification is relevant to judging whether or not to tolerate.

Chapter six begins the second part of the book by turning from questions of tolerance to questions of state neutrality. This chapter does the groundwork for my argument in chapter seven that political liberalism rests on a relativist foundation, by examining the concept of neutrality and the justifications offered for it in liberal theory. I distinguish, as suggested by Colin Bird and Charles Larmore, between neutral and non-neutral justifications of state neutrality. Non-neutral justifications are those such as Mill’s, that base a commitment to neutrality on a controversial value such as individuality or autonomy. I suggest that existing ‘neutral’ liberal defences of neutrality based on ideas of reasonableness and equal respect — such as those mounted by Rawls and Larmore — are problematic.

Chapter seven focuses on the character of the justification for neutrality offered by political liberals. I identify the core claims of the argument, and argue that these must rest on a foundation which — contra the claims of political liberals — is controversial and involves metaethical questions. I undermine the claims of political liberals that the argument is uncontroversial by indicating how a kind of confused proto-relativism already features in political liberal arguments. I suggest that relativism provides a natural foundation to this kind of liberalism, answering liberal worries about scepticism and helping to specify the key liberal idea of reasonableness. The chapter concludes by speculating on some of the possibilities for such an explicitly relativist liberalism.

Method

In this introduction, I have set out the key concerns of the book and its structure. My methodology has so far been implicit in the discussion: here I want to highlight three key aspects of my particular methodological approach.

First, I have already indicated that the book is concerned with theoretical analysis and argument across the fields of metaethics, ethics, and political philosophy. While it is commonly thought that moral philosophy in some sense 'sets the boundaries' for political philosophy, there has been an increased tendency to get on with the examination and application of moral principles, thinking that this can be separated from asking questions of the nature of morality, of moral truth and justification (Rawls, 1999a). However, the book operates on the basis of several links between these areas. In chapters five, six and seven, I will examine the implications of theories of moral justification for moral and political arguments. I argue there that we cannot exclude metaethical questions from a thorough assessment of political philosophies.

Second, my analysis makes use of reflections on our common moral experience. For many thinkers I examine, these constitute the raw material for moral, political and even metaethical philosophy. Amongst those thinkers are, for example, John Rawls, Thomas Nagel and David Wong. This, however, is not to disguise the disagreements about what should constitute the data and what the role of such data is in the argument. The points of agreement and disagreement will become clear in the analysis of particular theories. What must be said at this stage is that my own analysis also makes widespread use of the convictions, judgements and the experiences that help constitute our moral life. I assume that they form, in the absence of a good reason to reject them, a basic test or data set on which to work. Behind my arguments lie a set of common assumptions about such moral experiences; they can be more or less important or prevalent, more or less correct, and the justifications offered for them, or which they constitute in turn, can be good or bad, strong or weak. These are the kinds of terms in which I evaluate competing theories of moral justification and competing analyses of moral and political arguments.

Third, it follows that if I make my arguments in these terms, many of my arguments will appear irrelevant to those who reject the content or the very idea of common moral experience. Some might do this, for example, because they deny that our moral judgements ever come with or demand justification, or they deny that anything can be said about the moral lives of persons other than ourselves. For these people, imposing these kinds of formulas or relations on moral relations necessarily simplifies and distorts. Others will argue that moral beliefs can be reduced to psychology, the analysis of power-relations, or class interest. Whilst I think there is something to be said for explanation and

analysis of morality that takes these forms, I believe there remains a sense in which we can study morality *qua* morality, though not in ignorance of the way that these factors may feature in our moral views. As a tradition, relativism has often itself been accused of reducing morality to something else. I will deny that relativism, or our study of morality in general, ought to be reductionist in character. In response to these critics, I am relatively unconcerned that some of my arguments will possess force only for those who endorse some common features of moral life. My argument, after all, is premised on the idea that these features will be common to a wide constituency of people. Whether they are, or not, is for the reader to decide.