Ethical Relativism Essay, Research Paper

Ethical Relativism

Cannibalism, what do you think of it? Is it morally correct? Does the theory of ethical relativism support it or does it knock it down? Throughout this paper I am going to evaluate the pros and cons of ethical relativism for a case concerning cannibalism. An American man by the name of Daniel went to South America, for the reasons of writing a book on it and publishing it in the United States, to study a native tribe and to try to become part of it. While Daniel was studying this tribe they accepted him, and eventually made him part of their tribe. To be initiated into the tribe they had to raid a neighboring village and kill some of their neighboring tribesmen and bring them back and cook and eat their bodies, which Daniel took part. Is it morally acceptable for Daniel to engage in this ritual, and is it morally correct for Daniel to come back to the United States and practice this new culture, which includes cannibalism?

Ethical Relativism is philosophically defined as the view that whatever is morally correct is determined by the morality and behavior that a culture generally accepts as morally permissible. In short, the moral truth varies from culture to culture. There are four main parts to ethical relativism that make it easier to understand. First, there is a need for tolerance and understanding of other cultures. Second, there is moral diversity everywhere and it needs to be tolerated. Next, we should not pass judgment on practices in other cultures, which we do not understand. Finally, sometimes reasonable people may differ on what is morally acceptable, so why is their position to judge others morals.

Take for example our dilemma with Daniel and his new culture. The straight ethical relativist would say that whatever culture Daniel wants to practice is his business and no one should do anything to stop him from practicing what he believes as morally correct. Even if Daniel wanted to practice this new culture in the United States the ethical relativist would once again say that whatever his culture deems morally acceptable should be allowed. Finally, ethical relativism is the suggestion that we let each culture do as they see fit, but this is only really feasible when cultures don t have to interact with each other. For example, in the case of Daniel bringing his culture back to the United States, although the ethical relativist would let him, but it probably would not last because others would not be as accepting.

In this case of cannibalism inside a non-cannibalistic society (for the most part), we must also look at their behavior, and what is really relative. Different behaviors may bring about or exemplify the same value, or possibly even the same behavior may exemplify different values to an indifferent culture. So if Daniel s behavior was accepted by many in the United States, the culture might be accepted and grow through the United States, but if the surrounding culture was indifferent to cannibalism Daniel would most likely be castigated and thrown out of the community and possibly even the United States.

Another viewpoint to observe from is on the limitations that ethical relativism provides. Ethical relativism is not helpful at all when dealing with overlapping of cultures. Also ethical relativism is self-defensive. If we cannot judge others then they can neither judge us. From the self-defensive standpoint ethical relativism begins to make more sense to myself. So if Daniel were to bring his new cannibalistic society and culture into the United States, we would not be able to judge them, and they would not be able to judge us or try to force their culture onto us or our society as a whole. So they would eventually kill themselves off if they too were ethical relativists. This is so, because if they couldn t judge us or force their culture upon us then they would eventually eat each other and their society would die out (no pun intended).

Personally I believe that ethical relativism is only a worthy belief if cultures were never to overlap. So basically ethical relativism is worthless today because with the inter-net, worldwide commerce, and even the United Nations. These items are distinct ways that cultures interact with each other nowadays, excluding travel and tourism. There is no way that I could be a die-hard ethical relativist for the pure fact that I am not that open- minded. I personally, believe that I am very open to new ideas, but not as open minded as those who are ethical relativists. In Daniel s case I am perfectly accepting of his new cultural beliefs and practices, when they take place in a society that is already aware of their actions that have taken place for many decades. Yet, I am a hypocrite in the point that if he wanted to bring this perfectly acceptable culture into the United States and practice cannibalism as they did, it would instantly become an unacceptable culture in my eyes to exist in the United States. Although if they were to change their culture and not practice cannibalism or break any other laws of the United States their culture would probably be accepted, but most likely not endorsed by any Americans. I draw that line on my personal morals, which are basically formed around the laws, which I must conform to in order to lead the life of and upstanding citizen of the United States. So as assumed from the above statements I am not a dedicated ethical relativist, where I am almost the complete opposite. I believe every culture is entitled to their rights, but their rights should not interfere with those in other cultures surrounding them.

Ethical relativism is a very difficult theory to believe in. You must either be a flat out ethical relativist or not one at all. Sometimes we say that we cannot judge another culture because we cannot fully understand them, but if we begin to understand them does it give us the right to judge them. Do we need to have full understanding to judge something? Do we have a full understanding of ourselves? Does not believing in ethical relativism deny a main goal of multiculturalism or does believing in ethical relativism deny this? Where do you stand? Should Daniel be allowed to practice this new culture in South America, and then bring these practices back to the United States

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