Ethics
and Moral Relativism
Introduction

In this thesis I will discuss the subject of moral relativism. A reasonable starting point for such a discussion could be the following empirical claim: *Our first-hand experience of a foreign culture F tells us that there are moral practices of F that are different from our own moral practices.* For example, in some cultures it is considered wrong to consume alcohol, while in others it is not. In some cultures young boys are being circumcised, while in others this practice is considered immoral. I do not believe that there is a lot of controversy regarding the truth of this empirical claim. Different cultures do things differently. However, there certainly is a lot of disagreement about whether this claim can be said to imply any type of moral relativism at the meta-ethical level. In other words, are these differences fundamental, or are they simply differences at a derivative level?¹

In this thesis I will discuss two different perspectives on the problem of moral relativism. First of all I will discuss a version of *cultural relativism* that holds moral values as something that is determined by culture. Secondly, I will discuss a version of *ethical universalism* that holds moral values as something that is determined by human nature. According to the former perspective moral value relativism is true even at the fundamental level, and according to the latter moral relativism is true only at the derivative level.

The type of cultural relativism that I will discuss claims that the way that I perceive the world to be is determined by the concepts that I hold. In other words, we perceive the world through our concepts. This is an epistemological claim that I believe is widely accepted. Surely there are some who would disagree about the truthfulness of this claim, but this is not something that will be discussed in this thesis. However, a further claim that is made by the type of cultural relativism that I will discuss is that our concepts are determined by our culture. This second claim is something that has been questioned. For example, there are those who claim that our concepts are not determined by culture, but instead by human nature.² The underlying idea supporting this view is that there are certain defining features to human life that transcend all types of cultural differences, and this makes it plausible to believe that there are

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² One could surely argue whether all our concepts are determined by human nature, or if some are determined by human nature and some by culture, but I will in this case limit my discussion to our moral concepts.
universal moral values. The purpose of this thesis is thus to discuss the question of whether moral values are determined by culture, thus implying that moral relativism is true at the fundamental or meta-ethical level, or whether moral values are determined by human nature, thus implying that moral relativism is true only at the derivative level.

Disposition

In the first section of this thesis I will discuss some meta-ethical concepts that I believe to be central to any discussion of moral relativism. I will present a theoretical background to relativism in general and how those various theories and concepts relate to ethics, but also how they can be used to motivate why one could argue in favor of cultural relativism as a reasonable foundation for ethical theory. Cultural value relativism will be discussed in more depth in the second section of this thesis. However, the line of reasoning that will be discussed is in short (as mentioned above) that cultural relativism can be understood as a type of conceptual or perceptual relativism, which means that one could argue that it is possible to perceive the world through several different sets of concepts, which in turn thus also would imply that one could perceive any specific action through several different sets of moral concepts.

I will also introduce some counter-arguments to relativism that favors a universal approach to ethics and moral values. When I discuss ethical universalism in this thesis I am referring to what I have labeled as a type of Aristotelian approach to ethics. What this means, in short, is simply the argument that if we accept the idea that all humans to some extent share some type of human nature, we should also be forced to accept that all humans share at least some grounding experiences of the world as well. This would in turn imply - the argument goes - that we have reasons to believe that our moral values are universal, and not for example determined by culture, since we all share some grounding experiences of the world, such as the experience of being mortal, which according to this argument would be a particular experience that transcends all cultural differences. Ethical universalism, as it is stated above, will be addressed in more depth in the third and final section of this thesis.

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Theoretical Background: Meta-Ethical Concepts

This thesis started with the empirical claim that we can observe that there are moral practices of foreign cultures that differ from the moral practices of our own culture. A moral relativism of this type is often labeled as descriptive relativism. For example, we can observe that within Culture A the death penalty is an accepted and legalized moral practice, but within Culture B it is not. This is clearly a situation where we have two different cultures with moral practices that do not seem to be compatible with each other. However, a statement like the one made in the introduction, that our first-hand experience of a foreign culture F tells us that there are moral practices of F (for example the death penalty) that are different from our own moral practices, is a mere description of a situation, where we happen to find different or opposing moral practices in different societies or cultures. This empirical claim is, however, compatible with the view that both cultures are right, that only one culture is right, that no one of the mentioned cultures are right, and also with the view that there is no such thing as being right when it comes to moral values. In other words, descriptive relativism, as it is stated above, seems to be compatible with a large variety of views on the nature of moral values.

A type of view that holds that Culture A is right in its support of the death penalty, and that Culture B at the same time is right in its opposition against it, is often labeled as normative relativism. A moral relativism of this type is compatible with the view that moral values can be either right or wrong, but not absolutely or universally. Instead it is often argued that moral values are either right or wrong in relation to a given framework, for example in relation to a given culture. Thus cultural relativism can be labeled as a type of normative moral relativism. However, one should note that the cultural relativist does not justify his claims about normative relativism simply by pointing to empirical observations about different moral practices across cultures. Instead it is often pointed out that our perceptions of the world are theory-laden, which means that our perceptions, the every-day experiences that we all have, are all to some degree influenced by the concepts that we hold. This is a type of conceptual relativism that claims that for example different cultures might have very different central concepts that will lead them to different conceptions of the world. Thus this conceptual relativism imply that a type of perceptual relativism would be a reasonable view to hold.

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(since it is widely held that perception is theory-laden), which in turn imply that according to the cultural relativist, there is simply not just one way we can perceive the world to be. Instead several different ways might be correct relative to different sets of concepts and beliefs.\(^8\)

The view of moral relativism discussed above can, at least in my opinion, be labeled as a type of *ontological relativism*. Such a view also implies that the concept of truth is in itself something that is relative to a given framework. One could for example argue that our mind is constantly being bombarded by a chaos of sensory impressions from the world which we live in, a chaos that we can comprehend only by applying a specific set of concepts. Thus what is to be considered as facts and truth only arise after we first have structured our impressions according to a specific set of concepts; and – the argument goes – if we can structure our impressions according to a specific set of concepts \(C_1\), then why should we not also accept the possibility that we just as well could structure our impressions according to a specific set of concepts \(C_2\)?\(^9\)

A philosopher who did argue against such a relativistic account as the one mentioned above was Immanuel Kant. According to Kant's metaphysics there are some central concepts that are shared between all human beings, and this is something we can know a priori, because if we did not hold concepts such as causation, reality, object and property, negation, and so on, we would not be able to have the experiences that we have. Hence these are necessary concepts that cannot vary among for example different cultures. Thus if we were to accept Kant's metaphysics as a sound argument, it seems to me that we would be forced to accept that ontological relativism is an impossible view to hold. Thus according to such a view a person in culture \(C_1\) cannot be said to perceive a different type of reality compared to a person in culture \(C_2\).\(^{10}\)

The idea that there are at least some central concepts that can be said to be a necessary part of human nature does not, however, necessarily solve the issue of conceptual relativism in regard to moral relativism (unless we claim that our moral concepts are necessary as well). One could for example argue in line with David Hume, who claimed that our moral values are


based on our emotions and feelings. Thus those actions which we label as moral are actions of which we feel approval, or to which we have a positive emotional response. Such a view is, in my opinion, compatible both with Kant's view of a core of central concepts of the world that we all share, but also with the view that our values can vary across different cultures. One could for example argue that an anti-Semitic act would invoke negative emotions within a man living in a post-WW2 Germany, who then according to Hume's view would judge that specific act as immoral, but that the same man could probably have judged differently if he had been living in a pre-WW2 Germany. However, this does not seem to be Hume's view. What Hume seems to be saying is instead that our human nature is constituted by a certain set of dispositions that will cause us to have, generally speaking, a positive reaction of approval toward actions that benefit others and society as a whole. As Hume puts it:

> if you represent a tyrannical, insolent, or barbarous behaviour, in any country or in any age of the world, I soon carry my eye to the pernicious tendency of such a conduct, and feel the sentiment of repugnance and displeasure towards it. No character can be so remote as to be, in this light, wholly indifferent to me. What is beneficial to society or to the person himself must still be preferred. And every quality or action, of every human being, must, by this means, be ranked under some class or denomination, expressive of general censure or applause.  

Thus in this sense Hume's account of ethics seems to be meant as a universalist account and not a relativistic one. But on the other hand, I would still like to claim that it is not clear exactly how one should define the meaning of a concept like 'barbarous behaviour' or 'beneficial to society.' In this sense there still seem to be some room for a certain degree of conceptual relativism, and thus also room for a certain degree of moral relativism.

As I understand Hume, his view on moral truth can best be understood as a type of value idealism, which means that our moral judgments in some way are mental products, and hence also that moral truth is a socially and culturally constructed truth. On the other hand, it seems to be Hume’s opinion that our human nature is constituted in such a way that there are

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at least some actions that should be expected to be valued by everyone. For this reason I believe it to be incorrect to for example label Hume as a nihilist, which is a view that holds that moral judgments can have no truth value whatsoever.\textsuperscript{14} Thus in my opinion Hume escapes nihilism by referring to our human nature, a statement like ‘that which is beneficial to society is preferable to that which is destructive to society' would for example according to Hume's view always be true, because our human nature is constituted in such a way that we will always prefer that which is beneficial to that which is destructive, or at least prefer that which we perceive to be beneficial to that which we perceive to be destructive.

What is partly suggested by Hume is a conception of an ethics with human nature as its foundation. However, human nature is a rather problematic philosophical concept, since it is far from clear what it actually refers to. This problem has been brought to our attention by for example G. E. M. Anscombe, who claims that many modern moral philosophers (from Hume to our present day) seems to be arguing as if there is an omnipresent deity which we can use as a type of moral standard when making a moral judgment about a specific action. She refers to this notion as “a law conception of ethics.”\textsuperscript{15} In other words, many philosophers who use terms such as morally right or morally ought fail to give an account of how something can be morally right or why one morally ought to do anything at all. One approach would be to accept the existence of God, then we could say that what is morally right is that which is God’s will, and we morally ought to do certain deeds because we are all created in God’s image, but if we want to have a secular approach to ethics, this foundation is obviously not a possibility. Anscombe’s suggestion is that instead of accepting divine law as a foundation for ethics, we should return to Aristotle’s view of an ethics founded on certain human virtues. Thus what is needed, Anscombe argues, is an account of exactly what type of characteristic a virtue is, or in other words: “the proof that an unjust man is a bad man would require a positive account of justice as a ‘virtue’.”\textsuperscript{16} Thus according to Anscombe, if we want to avoid nihilism, and if we want to hold on to a modern secular account of ethics, we must be able to offer a plausible account of an ethics of virtue, and hence also a plausible naturalistic psychological foundation for our virtues, instead of a foundation based on divine law.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. p. 4-5.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. p. 18.
In the upcoming chapters I will discuss different approaches to ethics and the issue of moral relativism. Firstly I will discuss moral relativism as a type of cultural relativism, which states that moral relativism can be justified as a type of conceptual or perceptual relativism. Secondly, I will discuss moral universalism as a type of Aristotelian virtue ethics, which states that moral universalism can be justified by referring to our human nature as a foundation for ethics.

**Ethics and the Concept of Cultural Relativism**

It is probably correct to assume that to some people (at least among those who have had no philosophical training) cultural value relativism is considered as something that obviously must be true. We all probably have at least some first-hand experience of different situations where we find ourselves lost and confused by the traditions of a foreign culture and thus feel that these foreign cultural practices in no possible way can be compatible with our own cultural practices. In other words, we sometimes feel that experience tells us that there are fundamentally different cultural values. However, this is of course a very poor argument and hence not a very convincing one from a philosophical point of view. We cannot simply point to observed differences and then assume the issue of moral relativism as resolved. Instead we must first ask ourselves what the underlying explanation to these observed differences are.\(^{18}\)

One of the main philosophical arguments in favor of such an account of ethics that proclaims moral values to be something that is determined by and relative to culture, is that our perceptions are theory-laden. This line of reasoning can for example be found in the philosophical writings of anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovits. Benedict for example claimed that "No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking.\(^{19}\) As I understand it, Benedict meant that my perceptions of the world are limited to and determined by the concepts that exist within my own cultural sphere. Or, as she puts it herself:

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The life-history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community. From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behaviour. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities.20

Similar ideas as those expressed by Benedict can be found with Melville Herskovits, who claimed that:

all men are so conditioned in their perceptions, their emotions, and their judgments that these are framed, as far as the members of any group are concerned, within the limits of variation in belief and behavior sanctioned by the group at a given moment in history ... [Hence] it would seem that what cultural relativism implies in its recognition of the existence of cultural pluralism is ... that the values every human group assigns to its conventions arise out of its own historical background, and can be understood only in the light of that background.21

What is implied by both Benedict and Herskovits is that culture, through a process of "enculturative conditioning"22, shape both our thoughts and our behavior in such a way that any specific action taken by any specific person cannot really be said to have any meaning unless we relate it to the practices of a specific cultural context. What makes an action what it is, for example if it is something good or bad, is the cultural context in which it takes place. Thus to do something immoral is according to this view to do something that has been classified as immoral by a specific group of people within a specific cultural context, to which one also belong.

A philosopher who discusses similar issues as those discussed by Benedict and Herskovits was Edward Westermarck. According to Westermarck “all moral concepts, are ultimately based on emotions”.23 According to his view moral judgments can be said to be partly

22 Ibid. p. 24.
determined by culture since “we refer the subject of [our moral] judgment to a class of phenomenon which we are used to call good or bad ... because they have evoked moral approval or disapproval in ourselves or in other persons from whom we have learned the use of those words.”

In other words, “Society is the school in which men learn to distinguish between right and wrong.”

Thus for Westermarck there is no such thing as objective moral truth. Instead, moral truth is simply a product of custom and tradition. Those actions that are judged to be moral are simply those of which we approve of, and exactly which those actions of which we approve of are, is in turn determined by our cultural traditions and our beliefs about the world.

Benedict and Herskovits do not, as far as I know, specifically state whether they believe that our moral concepts have any cognitive content, or if they are based on emotions. This is, however, a question that goes beyond the scope of this thesis. In my opinion, the decisive factor of whether cultural value relativism as it is formulated above is a viable view to hold or not, is instead how one choose to define the concept of culture.

Defining Culture

It should be noted that at the time before and around the mid 20th century, the concept of culture was interpreted as a sort of self-reproducing social structure where values, traditions, and customs all were passed on from one generation to the next. It was also believed that different cultures were incommensurable wholes. This view led many scholars to argue in favor of a strong version or relativism implying that specific values could not be properly understood outside their cultural context of origin. Neither could moral values really be compared across cultures, trying to transcend these cross-cultural differences was seen as a futile task since the idea was that there was no common denominator to which values could be related.

I believe that both Benedict and Herskovits could be said to represent such a view of culture. However, today very few philosophers would accept that culture is such a static and closed system of inherited values and traditions. This view does not seem to be plausible.

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in the light of the escalating processes of global integration that to a large extent defines the world of today. A more reasonable definition of culture should thus in my opinion include the idea that culture is anything but a closed and intellectually homogenous system, rather it is something that is under a constant pressure of change and thus always in a state of transformation. By this I do not mean that the nature of culture is some sort of chaos. I only mean that there is always some pressure for change, either internal or external, and that the process of transformation most of the time only is noticeable in retrospect and on a very small scale. A more precise definition of culture that I would argue is in line with the views just expressed is given by Li, who declares that:

A culture is a body of informal knowledge that is historically inherited, transformed, embodied, and contested in traditions, incorporated and innovated in practices, and transmitted, altered through social learning, in a community of evolving and porous boundaries.

The above definition captures the idea of culture as something that Li describes as “a paradoxical social context” This implies that:

a culture can ... overlap and be compatible with other cultures … [It] can be uniform or have unity but it can also have its own internal heterogeneity and permit individualization … it also permits self-criticism by the members of the community, leading to (potential) transformations within it.

According to this definition of culture it would not be a very reasonable step to deduce an agent's moral judgments solely from that agent's current cultural context of origin, since the idea of fluid borders seem to open up the possibility of an almost unlimited number of potential sources of influence. In other words: "Individual members of the same tradition may have very different experiences, which can lead them to different moral judgments or motivations to act." Thus it seems reasonable to believe that we may have reasons to act in a

29 Ibid. p.155.
30 Ibid. p.154.
31 Ibid. p.158.
certain way that originates from a cultural context that is distant - both geographically and ideologically - from the one that is the dominant one in the region in which we are currently living. Even if it is true, which I believe it is, that we often can find consensus among persons raised under the influence of the same cultural traditions, it does not necessarily follow that we will find consensus or that there must be consensus among such persons. Instead the idea of communal and cultural belonging is, in regard to the definition of culture mentioned above, compatible with autonomous individuals with diverging judgments and beliefs. It should also be noted that if we describe culture as a structure that has fluid borders, it does not mean that we all in some way have the same culture or that the concept of culture in itself becomes useless. Neither does it, on the other hand, in itself prove that moral statements cannot be true or false relative to culture. A good analogy is given by Levy, who compares the concept of culture with the concept of language. As Levy puts it:

> The fact that cultures are neither bounded, nor completely homogeneous, does not show that moral statements cannot be true or false relative to them ... Languages are like cultures in both of the ways just mentioned. They, too, do not have clearly defined boundaries ... It does not follow from the facts that languages shade off into one another and that no language is monolithic that it is nonsensical to speak of particular languages. It is a mistake to think that because a concept has indistinct boundaries, it is not appropriate to use it.\(^{32}\)

Still, if one is willing to accept this 'paradoxical nature of culture', as Li describes it, we will at least have shed some reasonable doubt on the old school form of cultural relativism that was deduced from the idea that culture was a closed and static system of inherited values that could not be properly understood outside its relevant cultural context of origin. Because if culture is described as a structure with fluid borders – which in my opinion is a reasonable description – I believe that we have to admit that the view proposed by Benedict & Herskovits is compatible with moral universalism just as well as with moral relativism. It could be true (I’m not saying that it is), as Benedict & Herskovits claim, that our moral values are determined by culture. But such a claim would only point toward moral relativism if we assume that the concept of culture refers to a structure that exists as an isolated unity. I would like to point out that I do not interpret Benedict & Herskovits’ view of culture as a view that

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does not allow for the idea of external influences to culture. The difference I am proposing is rather that where they claim that external influences are being incorporated into a cultural structure with distinct borders, and then reinterpreted according to the cultural practices of that specific culture, one could just as well claim that external influences are not simply incorporated into a rigid structure, but instead that they reshape that structure altogether. Hence the view that our perceptions are theory-laden is in itself compatible with both moral relativism and moral universalism. However, here one should not be led to believe that cultural relativism have been dismantled altogether. Since the definition of culture given above clearly states that culture in some way can be described as a more or less heterogeneous social structure with fluid borders, is it not then plausible to argue that any such social structure should be constituted by a large variety of different values, which in turn would make a different form of cultural relativism a plausible thesis? In other words, if we describe culture as a structure that has evolving and porous boundaries, are we not then required to accept cultural and moral relativism as well, as a type of moral subjectivism?

Here I am not going to elaborate in length on the topic of moral subjectivism, mainly because I do not find it to be a very convincing view to hold. First of all, one could argue that if we were to accept the idea that moral values simply is a matter of subjective opinion, then how do we make sense of discussions and disagreements on topics such as the death penalty or abortion? The fact that we disagree and debate moral issues is in itself, in my opinion, a sign that tells us that we have reasons to believe that there is something more to morality than just subjective opinion. Secondly, one could also argue that it is not very reasonable to believe that just any opinion could qualify as a legitimate moral opinion. Surely there must be some consistency requirement, in regard to some specific situation or cultural context, to the moral opinions held by any specific person. We should be able to give at least some reasons to why we believe the things we do before any moral opinion could be considered as something to be taken seriously. In other words, it seems like there must be at least some limitations to exactly what that could qualify as a legitimate moral opinion.33 Furthermore, it is a fact that we sometimes change our minds about things, because we come to the realization that we for some reason were just plain wrong, and when we realize this we want to change our moral

judgments. Again, if we were to accept moral subjectivism, it would be difficult to make sense of the fact that we sometimes believe that we were wrong in our moral judgments.\textsuperscript{34}

A different critique of the type of relativism that is proposed by for example Benedict and Herskovits is given by James Rachels, who states that to argue from facts about the differences of cultural practices in different societies to a conclusion about the nature of moral values is a clear error in reasoning. The main problem with such an argument is that: “The premises concerns what people believe [and] [t]he conclusion concerns what really is the case.”\textsuperscript{35} It is not common sense to argue that we can conclude some fact X about the world solely due to the fact that there is some person who believes that X is the case. It is not difficult to come up with cases where our beliefs about the world has been proven wrong: people used to believe that Earth was flat and that it was the center of the universe, that there were witches who were practicing magic and flew around on broomsticks, and in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century there were still scientists who honestly believed that man had made all major scientific discoveries that ever could be made. The main point is that since we do not accept people’s beliefs about facts about nature and society as proof of those facts, we should neither accept people’s beliefs about morality as proof of the nature of moral values. Thus Rachels claim is that we cannot jump to conclusions about what really is the case, simply by referring to what people believe to be the case.

As a counter argument to cultural relativism Rachels propose a view that holds that what we believe to be real disagreements about values are most of the time just disagreements about what we believe to be a fact of the world. Hence according to this view cultural differences should not be understood as foundational value disagreements. Instead they should be understood as disagreements about exactly what actions that will realize what values. In other words, it is more plausible to believe that we actually agree about what goals are desirable to reach, and that we disagree about which road we have to take in order to reach that goal. According to Rachels, we should expect that there are some values that are shared between all forms of complex societies, because without these foundational values society would not hold together. For example, what if we did not value telling the truth, or if we did not value private


integrity and individual rights? Would a society lacking those values really be possible to uphold in the long run?\(^{36}\)

This type of moral value universalism proposed by Rachels is, however, somewhat problematic. What Rachels is arguing is that there seems to be certain needs that are shared among all human beings, and hence that there also are some universal values based on those needs. Thus Rachels seem to assume that cross-cultural agreement in moral belief imply that moral universalism is true, but just as it would be wrong to make assumptions about moral relativism simply by referring to diverging moral beliefs, it would be just as wrong to make assumptions about moral universalism simply by referring to beliefs that are shared across cultures, or as Nielsen puts it:

universal agreement in moral belief does not establish the soundness of the belief, for the soundness of a moral belief does not depend simply on the number of people who believe it but on whether adequate justifying reasons can be given for holding it.\(^{37}\)

A moral belief, or any belief about anything at all for that matter, is not sound simply because it is held by many, or even by all, inhabitants of a community. It is only sound if we can provide some reason to why one should hold any given particular belief. The reason given by Rachels why people across all cultures hold a belief like for example that telling the truth is something good is that it satisfies a universal need of some kind. It might be the case that there are, as Nielsen puts it, "deep-seated needs, distinctive capacities and characteristic human attitudes that are perfectly universal,"\(^{38}\) but why should these needs be satisfied? Is such a claim not in itself a moral judgment that is based on a moral standard that cannot be said to be deduced solely from our human nature? Instead such a claim that is made by Rachels seems to be deduced from a moral standard that is external to us. As Nielsen points out: "We all have needs for companionship and sexual satisfaction. But universal as such needs are, they can be so modified and controlled as to become almost non-existent."\(^{39}\) In a way one could argue that it seems to be the case that we choose, individually or collectively,


\(^{38}\) Ibid. p. 535.

\(^{39}\) Ibid. p. 537.
which needs that are to be fulfilled or satisfied. In other words: "After we find out what the needs of man are, we still have to find out which needs should be allowed to flourish and in what way, and which needs should be inhibited." Thus pointing to the existence of cross-cultural moral practices, or to argue from needs, does not seem to be enough if one want to establish ethical universalism.

Ethical Universalism

The argument for ethical universalism that I will discuss in this section is, simply speaking, the claim that we all share a common human nature, and that we also due to this fact share some specific grounding experiences of the world. What this means is that due to the fact that we are what we are – that is beings that are conscious of ourselves as existing in the world – we will have to face the world through certain spheres of experience. For example, the fact that we are mortals implies that we will face situations where we will have to deal with the experience of fear of dying. These spheres of experience are thought to be inescapable, and for example Nussbaum describes them as spheres “that figures in more or less any human life, and in which more or less any human being will have to make some choices rather than others, and act in some way rather than some other.” Furthermore, these universals are not thought to be bound by culture, but instead, the argument goes, it does seem like we “do recognize others as human across many divisions of time and place [and] we do have a broadly shared general consensus about the features whose absence means the end of a human form of life.”

According to this argument there is, in a way, an objective criterion for determining whether an action is to be considered moral or immoral: the action that reason dictates as the right one in relation to a specific sphere is also the moral (or the virtuous) one. Some examples of spheres of experience could be (1) fear of important damages, especially death, (2) bodily

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appetites and their pleasures, and (3) distribution of limited resources. Within the first mentioned sphere courage is the relevant virtue, within the second it is moderation, and within the third it is justice. In other words, within the sphere of experience that is fear of death, the courageous act is to be considered as the moral act. It is of course a difficult (perhaps impossible) project to give a final and complete definition of a virtue such as courage, moderation or justice. However, this difficulty is not necessarily a problem for this Aristotelian type of approach. The fact that there is debate about what the truth is does not necessarily show that there is not just one truth. In science for example we often have more than one explanation of a certain phenomenon but in the end we are only prepared to accept one account as the true account of that specific phenomenon. This one true account is reached through a process of reasoning and this – the argument goes – also apply to ethics. For example, according to Nussbaum:

we can understand progress in ethics, like progress in scientific understanding, to be progress in finding the correct fuller specification of a virtue [and] [t]his progress is aided by a perspicuous mapping of the sphere of the grounding experiences. When we understand more precisely what problems human beings encounter in their lives with one another, what circumstances they face in which choice of some sort is required, we will have a way of assessing competing responses to those problems, and we will begin to understand what it might be to act well in the face of them.

This approach to ethics can thus be viewed as "a sketch for an objective human morality based upon the idea of … appropriate functioning in each human sphere."

Benedict & Herskovits argued in favor of a type of moral relativism that was derived from the idea that our perceptions of the world are limited by the concepts that we hold, and that our concepts in turn are determined by our culture. This view thus implies that we cannot perceive the world in any way that goes beyond the scope of those concepts that our culture consists of. However, the Aristotelian approach to ethics is an attempt to justify the claim that our moral concepts in fact can be assumed to reach beyond the frame of our culture. By appealing to our shared experiences of the world that can be derived from our shared human nature, one could

46 Ibid. p. 665.
argue that there in fact are concepts that are not bound by culture. However, I believe that it is important to notice that this Aristotelian approach does not imply that every society will be more or less the same. Instead it is plausible to believe that these existential universals will be realized in a way that is dependent on a large variety of factors such as time, place, and even cultural context. Since it is clear that the challenges we face in our everyday life differ from different times and different societies, different universals should be expected to be emphasized in different contexts. Thus one could say that morality comes in a different costume depending on time and place, a *cultural costume*. However, a costume is just a costume, and underneath – the argument goes – we still find the same shared values.

One can note at least three major critiques of this type of Aristotelian approach to ethics. First of all the critics claim that if we accept the Aristotelian account of an ethics of virtue, then all that we can really conclude is that there is just one debate, but we cannot affirm the universalist claim that there is just one answer. Thus the Aristotelian approach falls short in dismantling any form of moral relativism, because the claim made is only that we all share certain experiences that are related to the fact of us being what we are. That is, the fact that we are all human beings imply that we all share certain experiences of the world that comes simply from the fact that we are human, for example the fact that all humans are mortal. The consequence of this, the critics claim, is only that we must in some way or another make at least some choices within the sphere of experience that is our experience of being mortal. It might be the case that there is only one answer to the question what the most virtuous action is within this sphere of experience, but it might as well be the case that there is more than one answer, thus implying that a pluralistic theory of morality is correct.\(^{47}\) This is for example a view that I believe is held by David Wong, to whom I will return later.\(^{48}\) Thus the type of Aristotelian approach to ethics that is advocated by for example Nussbaum - the argument goes - does not by itself solve the issue of moral relativism; it is instead compatible with both views.

A second critique is that it is not self-evident that we can treat the experiences that ground the virtues as primitives. In other words, critics mean that we cannot know for example that two different persons experience of mortality is the same experience. This critique, I believe, is


relatable to the view that is proposed by for example Benedict & Herskovits, and I also believe that it has some weight to it; at least it is a justified point to make. It is undoubtedly so that we do ascribe meaning to the things that we observe, and the content of such a process is to a large extent determined by situational and contextual factors (or, as Benedict & Herskovits probably would put it, by cultural factors). There are in this sense no pure observations.\textsuperscript{49} Nussbaum’s response to this critique, for example, is that “Relativists tend … to understate the amount of attunement, recognition, and overlap that actually obtains across cultures, particularly in the areas of the grounding experiences.”\textsuperscript{50} It is true – the argument goes – that our grounding experiences will fail to produce an account of virtue that is language neutral and independent of cultural context, but this does not necessarily imply that we do not have any reason to believe that we at least to some extent share the same experience of for example mortality. We could for example argue that the global world of today, with its profound and far-reaching cross-cultural communication and integration, is an example of just this claim; the fact that we actually are able to communicate and come to substantial agreements about how to resolve conflicts of interest related to apparent cultural differences could plausibly be interpreted as a sign of the existence of at least some shared grounding experiences.\textsuperscript{51}

The claim that we all share at least some grounding experiences of the world is in my opinion not an implausible claim. However, I believe that one can question whether the fact that we share some grounding experiences in it self would be a very convincing argument in favor of any type of ethical universalism. One important aspect of being human is without a doubt to be able to apply logical reasoning to our own situation as individual beings, and to our relationships with other people. The fact that the ability to reason about our own situation as beings in the world seems to be a part of our human nature in some way is also probably the cause behind why we have any moral codes and social conventions at all, combined with the fact that we all in some way seem to share certain experiences as well. Thus one could argue that we all share some experiences of the world that comes from the fact that we for example are mortal beings, and since reason in some way seems to be a part of our nature we come up with some type of moral practice that has as its purpose to structure our social behavior in

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. p. 671-3.
such a way that is compatible with how we experience the world to be as mortal beings. But is it really possible to deduce any specific type of moral code or practice simply by referring to reason and human nature? Is it not the case, as Nielsen puts it, that “understanding morality is not just really understanding ourselves”? It might be the case that one can point to some shared experiences of the world and to the fact that some degree of logical reasoning seems to be a part of our nature, and by doing so give a plausible account of why all societies has at least some articulated moral codes and practices. But it is in my opinion insufficient as an argument if one would want to explain why any specific culture has the specific moral practices it actually has, or why there seems to be so many differences between cultures when it comes to judging which actions that are moral and which actions that are not. It is just not plausible that immoral behavior simply can be reduced to irrational behavior.

Thirdly critics claim that it is possible to imagine a life that does not contain any of these grounding experiences, originally mentioned by Aristotle. For example generosity, it is claimed, is an experience that rests on the experience of private property, and the experience of private property can hardly be considered as a necessary part of what it means to be a human being. It is thus possible to imagine a person who has never had any experience of private property, and thus also possible to imagine a person who has never had any experience of generosity. Yet another aspect of this critique is the claim that some of these so-called grounding experiences are actually just parts of a limiting and oppressive social structure that is in no way natural or necessary. Marxists for example claim that our experience of justice and generosity are grounded on social structures that limit our growth as human beings and that should be abolished. Thus the argument is that contrary to what Aristotle claims our virtues do not contribute to our flourishing as individuals, instead they hold us back by maintaining bourgeois traditions. In this light morality is understood as a type of oppressive class ideology, and our consciousness of the world as it is described in terms of Aristotle’s spheres of experience is a false consciousness. Instead, a true consciousness of the world is to be conscious of ourselves as beings belonging to a specific social class, and thus

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54 However it is probably not likely that anyone could imagine a life that lacks all of these experiences at the same time, at least some of them should be expected to be present, but maybe none of them have to be considered as a necessary part of what it means to be a human being.
act in accordance with the principles of class relations and not in accordance with some moral principle.\textsuperscript{56} Or as Marx puts it himself: “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.”\textsuperscript{57} Again, it seems like we can deduce more than just one moral theory by referring simply to our human nature.

All these objections to the Aristotelian approach are in my opinion rather forceful objections that is hard to ignore. It clearly brings forward questions that necessarily must be answered before we can claim to have a sustainable theory of ethics based on the existence of objective human virtues, but these are questions that are not so easily answered, for example: “What circumstances of existence go to define what it is to live the life of a \textit{human being}, and not some other life?”\textsuperscript{58} Where do we draw the line for being human? Obviously these are difficult questions, and I do not intend to try to give a full definition of what it means to be human.

However, what we can say in defense of the Aristotelian approach is that no matter how the concept of a human being is defined (or how any other form of life is defined) there must be at least some boundaries and limits to exactly what properties that are the defining properties; and if we can accept this – the argument goes – we should also be forced to accept that there must be at least some grounding experiences that are shared between all human beings.\textsuperscript{59} Thus the main question that is in the center of the debate is if there is really just one morality that can be said to be a realization of our human nature, or if there are many, thus indicating that a pluralistic theory of morality would be a more appropriate approach to ethics.

\textbf{Moral Ambivalence: Challenging Ethical Universalism}

I believe that a pluralistic theory of morality has a lot of interesting viewpoints to bring in to any discussion of moral relativism, and one philosopher who proposes such an approach to ethics is David Wong. According to Wong:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. p. 675.
\end{flushleft}
Morality serves two universal human needs. It regulates conflicts of interest between people, and it regulates conflicts of interest within the individual born of different desires and drives that cannot all be satisfied at the same time. Ways of dealing with those two kinds of conflict develop in anything recognizable as human society. To the extent that these ways crystallize in the form of rules for conduct and ideals for persons, we have the core of a morality.\(^{60}\)

This is a functionalistic analysis of ethics and moral values that I believe to be compatible with for example Nussbaum's view as well. However as we have seen, Nussbaum's opinion is that such an account imply that moral values should be expected to be universal. Wong instead concludes that this functionalistic account of ethics implies that a sort of moral relativism is plausible. He argues that "... given this picture of the origin and functions of morality, it would not be surprising if significantly different moralities were to perform the practical functions equally well."\(^{61}\) Thus Wong's conclusion is that:

Moralities, on this picture, are social creations that evolve to meet certain needs. The needs place conditions on what could be an adequate morality and if human nature has a definite structure, one would expect further constraining conditions on an adequate morality to derive from our nature. But the complexity of our nature makes it possible for us to prize a variety of goods and to order them in different ways, and this opens the way for a substantial relativism to be true.\(^{62}\)

Thus both Nussbaum and Wong does in a way refer to human nature as the main determinant of our moral values, but as I have just shown they obviously disagree upon what the implications of this is for the plausibility of any form of moral relativism. We could almost say that Wong’s relativism is a sort of cultural relativism (although he does not label it as such himself). Not in the sense that what is moral is determined by culture, but in the sense that it is possible to choose or to emphasize different set of values in different cultures. The term Wong uses to capture this idea is 'moral ambivalence'; he describes it as the following:

We see that reasonable and knowledgeable people could have made different judgments than we are inclined [to] make about these conflicts, and any prior convictions we might

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\(^{61}\) Ibid. p. 446.

\(^{62}\) Ibid. p. 446.
have had about the superiority of our own judgments get shaken. Moral ambivalence is the phenomenon of coming to understand and appreciate the other side’s viewpoint to the extent that our sense of the unique rightness of our own judgments gets destabilized.63

What Wong claims is not that our own judgments get shaken because we come to realize that there are individuals who in some way have different values than us and who for that reason make different choices compared to what we would have made, but instead because we come to realize that there are individuals who in fact share the same values as we do but still make different choices. In other words it is a question about how to prioritize one good over another. As I understand it Wong would agree with for example Nussbaum that our moral values are determined by our human nature, which in turn implies that there is “… a common universe of values…”64 However, while Nussbaum seem to argue that there is really just one choice in any given situation that is the moral choice, Wong argues that there is in fact situations where more than one choice can be considered as the moral choice and the choice that we actually make is in turn determined by our cultural belonging. Thus Wong’s relativism can be labeled as a type of relativism of priorities. For example:

the source of disagreement … over the moral permissibility of abortion seems not so much to be a difference in the ultimate moral principles held by opposing sides as partly a difference over the applicability of a commonly held principle requiring the protection of human life and partly a difference over the relative weight to be given in the circumstances to another widely held principle requiring the protection of individual autonomy.65

I do not believe, for example, that Nussbaum would accept this type of ambivalence as a type of fundamental disagreement. As I understand it she clearly states that it is reasonable to believe that within a specific sphere of experience there is really only one view that is the ‘right’ one. Thus one could criticize Wong’s notion of moral ambivalence by claiming that it is not a case of any real fundamental disagreement, but instead only a type of disagreement that exist as a consequence of the complexity of the full concept of a virtue. In other words, the ‘truth’ about what moral system is the right one is simply to complex for us to comprehend, and that is why it might seem as there

64 Ibid. p. 7.
65 Ibid. p. 20.
are more than just one system of values than can be labeled as the right one due to the fact that they both seem to fulfill their social functions just as well. The world is complex, and so is our own nature. To make sense of it all is a task that simply is beyond the reach of any single individual. It should be expected, for example, that individual A’s interpretation of the world will differ from individual B’s interpretation of the world, as well as it is expected that culture A’s practices will differ from culture B’s practices. Thus the question is that if we do accept the notion of human nature that is proposed by for example Nussbaum, must we then also accept as a reasonable view that there is just one way of life that is the most reasonable way of life to choose? Or is it plausible, as Wong believes it is, to argue that an ethics based on human nature is compatible with a pluralistic theory of morality?

Summary and Discussion

In this thesis I have mainly discussed two different approaches to ethics and moral relativism. Firstly I discussed a version of cultural relativism that made the claim that any specific set of values is acquired through a process of what for example Melville Herskovits labeled as 'enculturative conditioning'. The philosophical foundation for such an argument is the idea that all our perceptions of the world are theory-laden, which means that we perceive the world through the concepts that we hold. What the cultural relativists claims - as an argument in favor of moral relativism - is that it is our cultural belonging that determines which concepts it is that we hold. In my discussion of this take on relativism I criticized what I believe to be an incorrect description of culture as a social structure, which is the view of culture as a static and closed system of values and ideas. Instead I introduced the idea of culture as a structure with fluid borders, as suggested by for example Li, which I believe to be a more reasonable description.

I believe that if we accept this view it becomes possible to question whether the idea that our concepts are determined by culture necessarily must point toward moral relativism. My critique do not imply that there is just one culture. Instead what it does imply is that since cultures are not static and closed entities, we should expect that some cultures, at some specific point in time, will merge together. Again, I am not saying that
they will merge together in every possible aspect and hence become just one culture, but only that we should expect that they will merge in respect to at least some aspects. In this sense I believe that it is possible to imagine a scenario with two different cultures sharing one set of moral values, in regard to some specific aspect of our lives. Personally I believe that if we accept that culture should be understood as a structure with fluid borders, capable of merging with other cultures, the idea of moral values as something that is determined by culture becomes questionable altogether. In my opinion it is more reasonable to believe that cultures merge together because there is some aspect of how we experience and perceive the world that is already shared among members across cultures, than it is to believe that people come to share values as a consequence of two cultures merging together. In other words, cultures can and sometimes do merge together because there are some values that we all share which are not culturally determined, hence it is not the case that we come to share certain values as a consequence of cultures merging together.

A common argument against cultural relativism is that what the cultural relativist believes to be fundamental differences in moral values across cultures, is simply differences in beliefs about facts of the world. In other words, what people disagree about is only what actions that will realize what values, not the values themselves. This is for example suggested by Rachels, and it is meant to be an argument in favor of moral universalism. However, as for example Nielsen points out, if we want to establish moral universalism, it is not enough to simply point to cross-cultural values and practices. Because just as it would be wrong to make assumptions about moral relativism simply by referring to diverging moral beliefs, it would be just as wrong to make assumptions about moral universalism simply by referring to beliefs that are shared across cultures. The soundness of any belief does not depend on the number of people holding that particular belief, instead it depends on whether we can provide some reasons to why we should believe as we do.

The Aristotelian approach to ethics that I have discussed in this thesis is in my opinion an attempt to provide such reasons. What this particular approach to ethics claims is that the action that reason dictates as the right one in relation to a specific sphere of experience, is also the moral one. Thus the argument is that if we accept the idea that we
due to our shared human nature also share some particular grounding experiences of the world, we should also accept that there is some type of appropriate functioning in each of these human spheres of experience. It is probably correct that one can point to some shared experiences of the world and to the fact that some degree of logical reasoning seems to be a part of our human nature, and by doing so give a plausible account of why all societies have at least some type of moral code. However, it is in my opinion insufficient as an argument if one would want to explain why any specific culture have the specific moral practices it actually has, or why there seems to be such a large variety of practices across cultures. Instead the idea of human nature, reason and appropriate functioning within our human spheres of experience seems to be compatible with a large variety of different moral practices, as for example Wong points out.

I do not believe that the idea that our moral concepts are determined by culture is a very convincing argument if one would want to argue in favor of moral relativism at the meta-ethical level. Because in my opinion this line of reasoning rely on a definition of culture that I believe to be a questionable definition. If one were to abandon the idea of culture as a closed whole in favor of the idea of culture as a structure with fluid borders, it seems like the idea that our moral concepts in some way would be culturally determined is compatible with both relativism and universalism. However, if one were to argue instead that our moral concepts in some way are determined by human nature, it is in my opinion not enough to simply refer to reason and shared experiences of the world. As for example Anscombe points out, human nature is not a concept that has any real clear and precise definition. I do agree with her in her opinion that as long as we lack a thorough psychological foundation of human nature, it becomes difficult to argue that there is simply just one moral practice in any given situation that is the right moral practice. As long as such a psychological foundation of human nature is missing, I believe that one could just as well argue in line with for example Wong and make the claim that even if our moral values in some way are determined by our human nature, moral relativism at the meta-ethical level is still possible; because our shared human experiences, needs and demands can be realized in the form of more than just one moral practice.
Conclusion

Initially I stated that the purpose of this thesis was to discuss whether moral values are determined by culture, thus implying that moral relativism is true at the fundamental level, or whether moral values are determined by human nature, thus implying that moral relativism is true only at the derivative level. To conclude, as I explained above, I do not believe that the version of cultural relativism that I have discussed is a very convincing argument if one would want to argue in favor of meta-ethical or fundamental moral relativism. However, neither do I believe that the idea of our moral concepts as something that is determined by human nature by definition would exclude moral relativism. At the moment I am prepared to accept the view that our human nature can be realized in practice in more than just one way. As long as there is no clear psychology of human nature that states that there is simply just one moral practice that is the right one, I believe that the idea of a pluralistic theory of morality is the view that best captures the reality of the world of today, which is a world with diverging moral beliefs and practices, but still a world that seems to be able to overcome these differences by acknowledging that we all in some way share a common nature, and thus also the potential to identify ourselves with other people, even when they are living under different conditions than we do.

Bibliography


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