

IT'S ALL RELATIVE

Philosophers frequently disagree. But even normal people have trouble reaching agreement. Think about all the nations at war, the litigation in courts, the children arguing over what game to play. Not surprisingly, it's no different with respect to morality.

There are tremendous moral differences across the world. In various cultures it is morally right to arrange marriages, to suppress political dissent for group harmony, to assign women lesser status than men; in the West these are all wrong. In some cultures it is even a moral obligation to circumcise daughters, while the label "female genital mutilation" pretty much tells you how Westerners feel about the practice. At the same time, many aspects of Western culture are seen as morally objectionable elsewhere, whether it's the materialism and consumerism, the stress on individual self-interest, the immodest modes of dress, and so on.

What shall we make of these differences? Is there any way to determine, in the face of such widespread moral disagreements, who is right and who is wrong?

As far as one of the philosophers in me can see, morality isn't out there in the world in the way that scientific or mathematical facts are. These latter exist independently of human beings and are thus things we need to discover; consequently, all cultures agree about them. Morality, to the contrary, is not something discovered but something invented, by different groups at different times and places. And as with any invention, it's entirely up to the inventor to decide what goes in and what stays out. Thus different cultures can establish whatever moral rules they like, and each culture is the only judge of what is right and wrong within that culture. By the same token, no one is in a position to judge other cultures' moralities.

So who's to say, then, who's right and who's wrong when cultures disagree on morality? Everyone and no one: for everyone can pronounce on their own culture's morals, but nobody can pronounce on another's.

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