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A Critical Review of Moral Relativism, Universalism, and the Teaching of the Catholic Church on Catholic Morality

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ABSTRACT

Ethical relativism is the thesis that moral judgments are comparative to culture and individual preferences. It claims that there is no universal morality as pointed out by moral universalism/absolutism. Moral universalism is the meta-ethical position that ethics or morality applies universally to all similarly situated individuals, regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexuality, or other distinguishing features. Catholic Church teaches that moral law is universal across people in varying cultures and fact is rooted in the natural human condition or reason. All adult persons can know the truth. John Paul II insisted that no matter how separated someone is from God, in the depth of his heart, there always remains a yearning for the absolute truth and a thirst to attain full knowledge of it.

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Introduction

Around 18 years ago, there was a talk among doctoral students about moral philosophy and religion. During the discussion, the students got into a conflict of ideas. One was influenced by moral theology, and the teaching of the church, while the other despite being Catholics, based their opinion on moral relativism. They insisted that morality is relative, but the other group stood their ground on morality, being universal and absolute. They ended up without settling on common ground. One group stated: “we should not bring religion into a discussion on morality. Another group answered, “we should not become relativist and become morally indifferent”. Does this kind of thinking represent most Catholics today?

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This discussion reminds the writer that people, particularly Catholics, are very much influenced by the popular concept of morality which is ethical relativism. Personal freedom and independence are their moral rule; it is no longer their religion, the teaching of the Church, or the teaching of Christ. Such a view approves the opinion of Nietzsche, a supporter of relativism, that God is dead so we can rule our own life; no outside force takes control of our life. Morality is best worked out by the Church. This then becomes a challenge amid a crisis.
Talking more about morality is encouraged, not to control but to guide its people according to the teachings of Jesus Christ that lead to eternal salvation. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John: 14:6). Thus, those who believe in Jesus Christ must have a common moral concept of what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. Universal morality is required to be applied to all. Thus, it is the role of the Church to interpret moral laws for all people beyond cultural boundaries and personal preferences.

This article will present three arguments, ethical relativism, universalism/absolutism, and the teaching of the Church on Christian morality as an answer to relativism. We should know the difference. This is to guide moral agents, particularly Catholics to know the kind of morality they follow and to live it in their lives. After having a clear stand on what morality to be followed, other types of morality need to be set aside. One cannot use two roads to travel simultaneously. Let us then clarify the meaning of morality.

Morality Defined

Morality can be classified as descriptive and normative. Descriptive morality refers to a code of conduct put forward by a society, group, or individual for her/his behavior. While normative morality refers to a code of conduct that would be put forward by all rational persons (Gert, 2020).

When morality is taken in its descriptive sense, it refers to an existing code of conduct put forward by a society, group, or individual to provide a guide for the behavior of that group or society. Such a definition leads to a denial that there is a universal morality, one that applies to all human beings across cultures (Kurt, 1958). Since morality is put forward by a society, many anthropologists claim that morality, like law, applies only within a society. Hence morality is different from one society to another or even from one group to another, or from one individual to the next. For example, what is considered "good" or "bad" in one society may not be considered "good or bad" in another society. Many philosophers refuse to adopt morality in its descriptive sense; however, some do namely: Protagoras, Baruch Spinoza, and David Hume. These philosophers are interested in moral relativism and claim that it is the only kind of morality there is (Westermarck, 1960). They deny universal morality or absolutism.

From another perspective, morality is taken in its normative sense. This means that there is a universal code of conduct that all rational beings put forward for governing the behavior of all rational moral agents. They deny that every society has a code of moral conduct; there is only one moral standard. Universal morality bases its claim on the natural law theory (Hauser, 2006). The natural law theories of morality claim that it is possible for any normal adult in any society to know the general kinds of actions that morality prohibits, requires, discourages, encourages, and allows. They also contend that morality applies to all rational persons (Gert, 2004). This includes all normal adults with sufficient knowledge and intelligence to understand what actions of morality prohibit, require, discourage, encourage, and allow, and with sufficient volitional ability to use morality as guides for their behavior.

Based on the normative sense of morality, it is an informal public system applying to all rational persons, governing behavior that affects others and the lessening of evil or harm as its goals. Consequently,

the public system guarantees that it is never irrational to act morally. It has no authoritative judges and decision procedures that provide a unique guide to action in all moral situations. When there is disagreement needed to be settled, societies use political and legal systems to supplement morality. However, it does not mean that everyone always agrees on all their moral judgments but only that all disagreements occur within the framework of an agreement. For an informal public system such as morality, fully informed moral agents can, within a limit, disagree in their moral judgments. But when disagreement is recognized, those who understand that morality is a public system regarding how one should act as morally irresolvable, then the problem is transferred to the political or legal system (Wren, 1990).

Moral Relativism

Relativism is a concept that all points of view are equally valid. No one can force or impose an opinion on others as the correct one to be accepted. Points of view are relative. It is conveyed that the opinion of others is to be respected. This refers to the concept that all kinds of morality are equally good. In epistemology, it implies that all belief systems are equally true. Thus, no one should impose one's beliefs on others (Gowans, 2021).

Specifically, there are three kinds of relativism namely descriptive, meta-ethical and normative relativism. Descriptive relativism, on one hand, is a thesis about cultural diversity. It holds that moral beliefs and practices vary between cultures and sometimes, between groups, within a single society. This denotes that different cultures have different ways of doing things to achieve the same ends. On the other hand, meta-ethical relativism states that there are no objective grounds for preferring the moral values of one culture over another. Societies make their moral choices based on their unique beliefs, customs, and practices. The truth or falsity of moral judgment is not objective or universal, but relative to the tradition, convictions, or practices of a group of people (Westacott, 2021). Meta-ethical relativism believes that people in one society /group do not hold the same moral standards and the term "right" "wrong", or "good or bad" are societal and personal preferences. Similarly, normative relativism implies that there are no universal moral standards. This means that there are no universal moral standards to judge the behaviors of people as to whether they are good or bad, right, or wrong. Thus, one needs to tolerate the behaviors of others, even if these are against one's moral and cultural values. Such a view leads to the idea that morality is a product of opinion. Moreover, people have their own moral rule, and society or cultures cannot overrule individual supremacy.

Nietzsche (1900) acknowledged that morality is not bad, it is good for the masses, however, it should be left to them. People should follow their own "inner law", as he said: "become what you are". He further argued that the death of God would eventually lead to the loss of any universal perspectives on things, and along with it, any coherent sense of objective truth. Instead, multiple, diverse, and fluid perspectives are retained.

The above opinion originated in the argument of a Greek philosopher such as Protagoras who provided an early precursor to modern Moral Relativism. Protagoras claims that man is the measure of all things (Plato, 1591). The idea of Protagoras was somehow supported by the Greek historian, Herodotus (484-420, B.C) as cited by Littlebury (1912). Herodotus argued that each society typically regards its belief system and way of doing things as better than others. Herodotus also pointed out that much of what is believed to be "fact' is actually "opinion". Such opinion influenced Hume (1985) in the early modern era. Hume denied that morality has any objective standards and suggested that the universe remains indifferent to preferences and troubles. The latest anthropologist, Edward Westermarck (1862-1939) claimed that all

moral ideas are subjective judgment that reflects one's upbringing. He pointed to the obvious difference in beliefs among societies, which he said provided evidence of the lack of any innate, intuitive power, and any universal or absolute beliefs.

The Influence of Moral Relativism and its Critical Evaluation

Moral relativism has influenced the views of many people of the modern generation on how they look at others, their cultures, and how they deal with each other. Relativism teaches us to understand and respect one another despite differences including moral issues. One cannot judge the actions of other people as immoral because there is no common basis for ma oral standards Morality is diverse (Harman, 1978). A person or society cannot claim to be better than others. One cannot pass judgment on practices in other cultures when these are not understood. Reasonable people sometimes may differ on what is morally acceptable. Therefore, morality becomes individual or group business, not society (Harman, 1978).

Ideas mentioned above may mislead and convince Catholics that moral relativism is the right moral standard to be applied by individual persons. Humanists and relativists are happy to embrace moral relativism. However, the arguments need to be examined critically and ponder whether moral relativism can be applied to everybody, particularly to the Catholics.

Aside from the benefits, the setbacks are examined. First, the source of moral relativism is subjective personal motive. In their minds, moral absolutism would make them unhappy by making them feel guilty. They call absolutism unloving and uncompassionate. They are not aware that the absolute moral law exists not to minimize but to maximize happiness and therefore it is compassionate. Relativism assumes that feelings/sentiments are the standards for judging morality. But the claim in traditional morality is the opposite: that morality is the standard for judging feelings (Kreef, 2010, Sri, 2012).

Second, another argument given by relativists is that moral relativism is an empirical fact. Morality is based on fact, and experience. Facts and experience are varied. This means that different cultures and societies have very different moral values. They claim that moral rightness is a matter of obedience to cultural values. However, absolutists/universalists deny that it is always right to obey your culture's values. Absolutism has trans-cultural standards by which one can criticize a whole culture's values. That is why one could be progressive and radical while the relativists can only maintain status-quo having no higher standards than their own culture. It is only the believer in the old fashion-natural moral law who could be a social radical and progressive. Only the absolutists can condemn the 9/11 attacks as an immoral act. The relativists could only say let them examine what they are doing (Kreef, 2010, Sri, 2012).

Third, related to the argument on freedom, moral relativism claim that they alone can guarantee freedom and moral absolutism threatens freedom. People often wonder how they can be truly free to create their values. Experience teaches that one is free to create some alternative rules or codes such as dress code, hair code, etc. But we are not free to create alternative moral values. Everyone cannot make murder, rape, and killing right or make justice, charity, and love wrong; nor can they not find a moral obligation to rape or to kill.

In the final part, the challenge of relativism morality is how we live together harmoniously with differing and conflicting values. What would bind us together if we do not recognize one truth? How can a leader lead a society in one direction if all members do not agree with each other? There will be no peace and unity if we recognize different truths and moral values. No ideas can be met in discussions and no common agreement will be followed. Consequently, United Nations will never declare human rights as

universal moral values if all nations will not agree and the Catholic Church will never pronounce its morality on certain actions. That kind of life is an illusion. It denies our inner desire for harmony which can be gained through the common understanding that we find in universalism or absolutism (Kreef, 2010, Sri, 2012).

Universal Morality/Absolutism

Contrary to relativist morality, universal morality is individual and culturally independent and that applies to all rational human beings and beyond culture. Moral universalism is the meta-ethical position that ethics or morality applies universally for all similarly situated individuals, regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexuality, or other distinguishing features (Cureton2022).

The application of universal morality would be: if an action is right or wrong for others, it is also right or wrong for us" "If something is right for you and if it is wrong for you, then it is right or wrong for me". Along this concept, all rational beings have the same concept of what is good and bad, right, and wrong making it easier to judge other people's behavior and other cultures. Immanuel Kant with his maxim principle argued that a certain act is moral if you allow others everywhere to do the same under the same circumstance, otherwise, it is not moral. (Cureton, 2022).

If universal morality is taken from its normative sense of morality, then it does not need to have two features that are essential to morality as defined by descriptive sense, ***that it be a code of conduct that is put forward by a society and that is accepted as a guide to behavior by the members of that society.*** Morality in its normative sense may have never been put forward by any society or group of individuals. It claims that any normal adult can know what good and bad are, and what right and wrong are. It further argues that morality is known to all. But how do people know whether it is right or wrong, good, or bad? There is no written existing law to determine or judge behavior, but it comes from reason. Everyone possesses reason and conscience. Thus, judging behavior is based on reason or natural law (Bauman, 2007)

Natural law is as strong and binding as a physical law, such as gravity and energy. Natural law does not depend on the interpretation or feelings because they exist independently. Rape is wrong regardless of the intention and outcome behind it. The intensity of anger does not matter because it is inherently wrong. Rape cannot be argued as right and wrong depending on certain circumstances or cultural aspects. The truth is that rape is wrong. The truth cannot have it both ways, truth can only be one. Truth has and never will change. Personal opinion is not the truth, and neither does status give the truth. The truth is the truth and exists independently. Morality must be based on objective truth, not relative truth. Relative truth will tell us that an act is relative to the context, situation, culture, and person. It comes down to two opinions. A person may judge rape as wrong or immoral but others may judge it as moral and a person cannot impose a moral judgment on others. How are they going to reconcile? It is only when they admit that there is a natural law, an unchanging one that is above personal opinion and beliefs that one can claim action is morally right or wrong (Sri, 2012).

According to universalists, morals are inherent in the law of nature, hence, the nature of humanity (Mineshema-Lowe, 2010**)**. They regard actions as inherently or inarguably moral or immoral. It does not need another person to tell someone that a certain act is immoral or moral because the act alone can be judged whether it is immoral or moral. Furthermore, all adult rational moral agents know whether it is moral or immoral. Moral universalists might, for example, judge slavery, the death penalty, or rape to be absolutely and inarguably immoral regardless of the beliefs and goals of a culture that engages in these

practices. This means that an action, regardless of the circumstances, can be judged either good or bad, right or wrong, and not both ways.

The Influence of Universalism/Absolutism and Its Flaws

Universalism morality assures certainty, security, protection, and impartiality (Gomberg, 1994). There is only one truth. The position of one or a group embodies that truth. In this premise, people and society, beyond the boundaries of culture, can be one and judge actions against humanity as immoral. For example, people across cultures condemned the act of Hitler as a crime against humanity despite the reason behind it. There is always a common agreement when it comes to issues of morality. Slogans used under universal morality are the following: "everything for everyone" and nothing for us", "what we defend, we defend for everyone", and "your struggle is our struggle" under universal morality. Moreover, society can live harmoniously without conflicting moral values. No society is considered better than the others in terms of moral values.

However, it has always been criticized that universalist morality does not give moral agents the freedom to exercise moral judgment. It disregards the cultural values that have been existing a long time. Some have argued that without free will, the universe is deterministic and morally uninteresting. If all moral choices and behavior are determined by outside forces, there can be no need for any person to ponder morality (LaFollette, 1991). The main concern is absolute morals and their sources are subject to human interpretations. It is emphasized that for morals to be truly absolute, they would have a universally unquestioned source, interpretation, and authority. Thus, the critics say, there is no conceivable source of such morals; there will never be universal agreement on what those morals are. However, Catholic Church has the answer. It has the authority to pronounce and interpret moral issues affecting human life through its magisterium.

Veritatis Splendor: The Answer to Moral Relativism and Catholic Morality

Personal freedom has become the rule of life today. People are becoming independent and trying to see everything from their perspective, not according to the common perspective. No common moral standards are being followed. Gone are the days when the old folks were so strict in educating their children to follow what is right and avoid what is wrong, do what is good and avoid what is bad. In those days, people were clear with their values and lived accordingly. They were guided only by one truth. Today, people become relative and morally indifferent. Everything is relative, there is no absolute truth. Truth becomes varied according to personal preferences, cultural values, and situations. People define an act, whether it is moral or immoral, and not on common moral standards. It is based on their personal preferences and cultural perspectives. This kind of perspective influenced the life of Catholics during the post-war in Europe. The Europeans replaced absolute moral values with moral relativism.

Pope Benedict XVI as cited by Allen (2010) indicated that after about 1960, Europeans massively abandoned many traditional norms rooted in Christianity and replaced them with continuously evolving relative moral rules. People play with their own rules according to their perception. What they think is good for them, is their moral rule. In their view, sexual activity is separated from procreation, which led to a decline in the importance of families and depopulation. Currently, the population vacuum in Europe is filled by immigrants, by Muslims from Islamic countries who attempt to establish absolute value which stands at

odds with moral relativism. What happened in Europe a long time ago, now is being practiced by many all over the world including Asians particularly Filipinos. The situation causes concern for the Catholic Church which pushes Catholic Church to respond. And the most authoritative response to moral relativism from the Roman Catholic perspective can be found in Veritatis Splendor or the Splendor of Truth. ***(John Paul II, 1993).***

The duty of the magisterium to answer the moral question was emphasized by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical letter, Humane Vitae. ***Pope Paul VI (1969***) emphasized that no member of the faithful could deny that the Church is competent in her magisterium to interpret the natural moral law. It is indisputable that Jesus Christ communicated His Divine power to Peter and other apostles and sent them to teach His commandments to all nations. They were constituted as the authentic guardians and interpreters of not the only law of the gospel, but also natural moral law. Similarly, natural law declares the will of God and its faithful observance is necessary for men's eternal salvation. Thus, it is within the role of the Church, John Paul II wrote his Veritatis Splendor.

The Encyclical answers the questions about man's ability to discern good, the existence of evil, the role of human freedom, a human conscience, mortal sin, and the role of the magisterium of the Catholic Church. In response to the claim of relativism morality that there is no universal moral truth, Pope John Paul II argued that moral truth is comprehensible to all persons. The moral law is universal across people in varying cultures. It is rooted in the human condition. John Paul II insisted that no matter how separated someone is from God, in the depth of his heart, there always remains a yearning for the absolute truth and a thirst to attain full knowledge of it. He continues to say that the splendor of truth "shines deep within the human spirit".

John Paul II argued that to ask about the “good" simply means to turn toward God, the fullness of goodness. He emphasized that the magisterium of the Catholic Church has the authority to pronounce moral questions. Even more, John Paul taught that the Church is Christ's particular response to help answer everyone's questions of what is right and what is wrong. Consequently, what is pronounced "good", or evil, by the Church, that is morally absolute for all Catholic and that is binding to all the followers of Christ? One catholic cannot proclaim his version of the "good" and the "evil". Catholics have only one truth.

Against the criticism of humanists and relativist groups that the Catholic Church is deterministic and does not allow human freedom to exercise moral judgment, John Paul(1993) reiterated that there is no true conflict between human freedom and God’s law. He pointed out that the true end of human freedom is growth as a mature person into how each is created by God. God's law governing human behavior is not opposed to human freedom but rather it protects and promotes that freedom. Such an idea leads us to the conclusion that exercising human freedom is to lead us to perfection as God is perfect. So long as freedom is for human perfection, it is moral. However, Pope John Paul II (1993) cautions everyone that freedom is not absolute. Merely deciding for oneself to do something is not a true substitute for determining whether something is good or bad.

John Paul II (1993) welcomes the role of human reason in discovering and applying the natural law, however, he reminds us that God remains the true author of moral law. Human reason will not supersede the elements of the moral law that are of divine origin and that would be the death of freedom if reasons overtake divine law. In line with human acts, the encyclical argues that certain acts are intrinsically evil. This means that these are always wrong and that there are never circumstances in which they must permit if done knowingly and intentionally. The ends do not justify the means. There are certain acts so

destructive to the human person that there are no extenuating circumstances that would allow them. John Paul based his opinion on the teaching of Pope Paul VI (1969) in the encyclical Humanae Vitae concerning contraception that there are no circumstances in which the practice is elicited.

Conclusion

The different theories of morality are caused by their different perceptions. Such theories have caused division in human society and so we have moral relativists who claim that morality is relative to the person, situation, and culture and moral universalists /absolutists who claim that there is a common or universal moral standard for everybody and culture. Moral values are beyond the boundary of culture and individual preferences. What is moral in one society, the same is applied to all rational moral agents everywhere.

The effect of these moral perceptions on the life of people is great. It influences the moral behavior of everyone. Hence, there are problems of double moral standards in society and conflict of moralities. People have no idea of what kind of morality they must follow: moral relativism or absolutism. There is a need to have the authority to interpret morality and impose it on everybody amid the situation. The Catholic Church has answered to such a problem through its Veritatis Splendor or the Splendor of Truth. It is the answer to moral relativism and confirmation of moral universalism or absolutism. Veritatis Splendor emphasizes that moral truth is understandable to all rational people so that it is universal in varying cultures and there is no true conflict between human freedom and God's law. Human freedom, in turn, must lead the person to perfection as God is perfect. And that God is still the author of moral law. God's law is beyond culture or universal. If the motive of moral relativism is their deepest desire for happiness, the motive of Christian morality is their deepest desire for ultimate happiness and eternal salvation.

Finally, for Catholics, life should be guided beyond feelings and pure reason, it should be guided by God's law. The fulfillment of God's law is in Jesus Christ, as the way, truth, and life. Living the life of Jesus Christ is a way of living moral life that will lead to eternal salvation and ultimate happiness, and not temporary happiness as claimed by relative morality.

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