Relativism And The Questions Of Morality

Relativism is the philosophical belief that morality throughout cultures is unique and ethical to that certain culture. When topics such as: rape, torture or cannibalism are discussed in a forgiving light, conversations about whether relativism is ethical begins to be brought up. Relativists argue that each society has different moral codes and therefore, a global standard cannot be enforced. On the contrary, non-Relativists argue that human rights should be paramount in any culture and violating those human rights makes the action unethical. For many, emotions are hard to detach from certain situations, but to Relativists as long as the cultural in question finds the action ethical then that action will be labeled as ethical.

The main trait of relativism is that morality is subjective and cannot be standardized on a global, or even regional scale. For example, if culture X finds rape permissible but culture Y claims it is unethical, the Relativist would proclaim both cultures as morally right. No matter the circumstance or weight of a topic, a Relativist will always argue that ethics are unique from culture to culture, but none are wrong or right. For many human rights advocates, typically from western states, this belief becomes troubling when rape and other heavy topics are considered. There are plenty of arguments that call for a globalized standard for human rights such as a right to life, free speech, right to a fair trial and so on.

An argument by certain cultures in question, is that of neocolonialism. Colonialism itself has died out in recent decades but an emerging practice, neocolonialism, seeks to fill the void left from its departure. Neocolonialism plays an important role when considering the belief of relativism because calling for a globalized standard for ethics can easily be seen as a call for western ethics to be imposed upon cultures from different origins. For many cultures' neocolonialism is yet another sign that the West cannot keep beliefs and affairs out of neighbouring states and must indoctrinate civility within that culture.

In culture X, if it has been practicing rape for centuries and that culture observes it to be permissible then it cannot be infringed upon by outside cultures directly or indirectly because there is no right or wrong in the scenario, only a bias towards a certain culture. True Relativists can completely disconnect themselves from emotions and preconceived notions that they were surrounded by and open themselves up to interpretation unequivocally. To understand the Relativists argument on the emphasis of culture, imagine a pyramid. At the bottom of this pyramid is culture and all the complexities along with it. The Relativist argues that the foundation for moral beliefs is culture, and everything will build upon that. So, if an outside culture, culture Y, tries to impose their moral beliefs upon a unique culture, culture X, it will be neither successful or even achievable since the foundation wasn't addressed.

It is difficult, with the knowledge of Relativism, to deem one action as unethical and another as ethical. All actions are subjective and will be determined case by case rather than stamping unethical on rape, or any other action as universally wrong. The argument for basic human rights is one that cannot be ignored though. There is a basic level of humanity in all corners of the globe, so beginning with addressing the most basic could be an excellent place to start, such as a right to free will. Everyone should have the ability to say yes or no to an action and understand the repercussions of that action. Although, this directly contradicts the core

argument for relativism which is no outside culture can impede on another culture's desires.

If a person is from a Western background, they will most likely find topics such as cannibalism or rape repulsive and unethical. In Canadian culture this is true, these acts are illegal and unethical in terms of the general public. This does not mean that these actions are wrong globally, just regionally. While cannibalism and rape should be illegal and unethical in Canada, in places such as Indonesia or Kazakhstan these practices could be seen as ethical by that certain culture. This is the difficult part of relativism, heavy topics such as these do not have a clear answer and for human rights advocates that is an issue because when speaking about human rights there should be no grey area left for interpretation.

Adopting relativism as a core belief in countries around the world will not solve pressing issues that deserve the attention of multiple cultures. Traits of relativism are helpful in certain contexts while others are unusable. As humans, emotions are a large contributor to our everyday lives and for some, disconnecting those emotions from heavy topics is near impossible to do. That is why the main obstacle for relativism to hurdle over is empathy. Unless humanity becomes completely devoid from all walks of life, relativism will never become a core belief system in cultures around the world.