

by Michael  
Watkins

## My Favorite Howlers by Michael Watkins

Relativism concerning some domain of inquiry, as I will understand it, is the thesis that whether a statement concerning that domain is true or false is relative to or dependent on the beliefs of an individual, group, or culture. So you are a relativist about morality, for instance, if you think that an action might be morally permissible in one society, though an action exactly like it in every nonmoral respect might be morally wrong in another society.

Relativism's truth is, to many, obvious. Failure to see that it's true is proof of ignorance, a manifestation of anthropological naiveté. That, at least, is the view held by many in the academy. It is not, however, the view most commonly held by philosophers. And it is certainly not my view. Indeed, I think that relativism is hardly worthy of serious consideration.

My thesis, then, is simple: no one has ever had a good reason to think that any interesting version of relativism is true. My argument is incomplete: I cannot hope to discuss every reason anyone has ever had for being a relativist. Instead, I employ the following strategy. I'll give you a list of mistakes that relativists tend to make. The list isn't exhaustive. Relativists have made far more mistakes than we can discuss today. So I'll settle for giving you the greatest hits—the best of the howlers—and then I'll throw down the gauntlet. I ask the relativist to provide a good argument for his position. Failing that, I'll insist on his silence. I'll provide my list of greatest hits by giving you a list of don'ts—some arguments that relativists have, but should not have, employed. I'll focus on arguments for ethical relativism, but what I have to say applies, *mutatis mutandis*, for any version of relativism.

Before beginning in earnest, let me clear aside one common mistake. **Don't confuse the boring with the interesting.** Of course, the very same action in one context (e.g. lying) might be wrong, though in another context it is permissible, or even required. If lying will save a friend's life, for example, you may be morally required to lie. But recognizing this is not to recognize the truth of relativism. What the relativist requires is

that the principle that justifies your lying to save a friend would not justify someone in another society in lying to save a friend. Now to slightly more interesting mistakes we should avoid.

**Don't be tempted by the stupid argument.** The stupid argument has the following form: different cultures have had different beliefs about what is right and wrong; therefore, what is right and wrong depends on which culture you belong to. This argument is so transparently bad that I fear I insult your intelligence by mentioning it. But alas, many are tempted by it. To see that it's bad, consider the following argument having exactly the same form: different cultures have had different beliefs about the shape of the earth; therefore, the shape of the earth depends on which culture you belong to. The mistake is simple: the mere fact that people have believed some proposition doesn't entail that the proposition is (or was) true.

Perhaps you think I'm being uncharitable. You might think this for several reasons. Here's one. We can empirically determine the shape of the earth, but, you might think, there's no way to empirically determine whether some action is morally right or wrong. That takes us to <sup>our next</sup> ~~the second~~ don't.

**Don't let your picture of empirical facts hold you captive.** It may very well be true that you cannot empirically settle a moral dispute as you can settle a dispute about the shape of the earth. But then again, many disputes cannot be settled empirically. (Sorry Rob.) It has long been debated whether there's a proof for Fermat's last theorem. Everyone in this dispute believed that the theorem was either provable or not, though no one thought it could be empirically proven. It requires a mathematical proof, and mathematical proofs are not empirical. Now whether moral disputes can be settled empirically or not is a complicated question, in part because it isn't clear what counts as empirical evidence. If by 'empirical evidence' you mean evidence provided by science, then I doubt there's a purely empirical way to settle every moral dispute. But then, if that's what you mean by 'empirical', then there's no empirical proof for the existence of chairs in

this room. Science doesn't talk about chairs. But all that follows from the fact that science doesn't talk about chairs (or morality) is that science doesn't talk about chairs (or morality). There's more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in your physics. And much (if not all) of that is rather commonplace. Perhaps you'll insist, though, that there's no way—empirical or otherwise—to settle moral disputes. There are several mistakes lurking here. Here's one.

**Don't confuse epistemology and metaphysics.** Again: don't confuse epistemology and metaphysics. And one more time, because the mistake is so common and results in much bad reasoning: don't confuse epistemology and metaphysics. What we know is one thing. What there is is another. The mere fact that we can't settle a dispute doesn't entail that no one's right. I assert the following: 10,000 years ago a large boulder stood where I presently stand. I have no idea whether I'm right, and I suspect that there's no way to find out. But the claim is either true or false for all that. Our not being able to decide whether it's true is not a good reason to be relativists about where boulders were 10,000 years ago. And here's another mistake in the neighborhood.

**Don't assume we can't determine who is right simply because we haven't.** Some problems are hard. We recently discovered a proof for Fermat's last theorem. It took a long time. Giving up the quest—deciding not to work any longer to find the answer—is a bad reason to be a relativist. Nothing follows from laziness. And here's another mistake just around the corner.

**Don't be held captive by the hard cases.** Relativists are fond of pointing out that some disputes offer no obvious solutions. They might offer examples like the abortion debate or the debate over capital punishment. They likely will not discuss the dispute over whether torturing small children solely for the purpose of entertainment is morally permissible. They won't because there's no dispute. It's obvious to all of us that it's wrong. How do we know?

**Don't confuse whether we can know something with whether we can know how we know something.** I know that I exist. And I know that  $2+2=4$ . I'm not sure how I know these things. I don't know what my evidence is. I don't have a proof. But I'm quite sure that I know them. The skeptical among you (yes, you Bill) will likely point out that we might be mistaken about all of this. Couldn't we be wrong about, for instance, whether torturing small children for entertainment is wrong? Perhaps. But nothing interesting follows. You're now making another mistake.

**Don't confuse knowing something with knowing that you know it.** There's much that we know that we could be wrong about. Perhaps some evil demon manages to keep us constantly confused about tables and chairs, mathematics, and the morality of torturing small children. It's possible. We could be wrong, but we aren't. And we're sure of it. Here the skeptic will inevitably make one of the mistakes already noted above and all we can do is again remind him that it's a mistake. I didn't promise to rid the world of relativism. I only promised to show that there's no good reason to play along.

**Finally, don't assume that simply because you don't know something (or even that many don't know something) that no one knows it.** There may be very good arguments for a particular side to a dispute, and some may know these arguments. Just because you don't know them, or choose to ignore them, doesn't entail that others don't know which side is correct.

I should mention another mistake that the relativist might make. The relativist might point out, for example, that what we take to be morally right and wrong is the result of our evolutionary history, or what our society has taught us, or the ongoing power struggles between various social groups. But **don't confuse the cause of our having the moral beliefs we have with the reasons we have for holding those beliefs.** It is certainly true that had I been born at a different time, or taught by different people, I would not have believed that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. But for all that, I have good reason to believe that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. Indeed, I know it is.

These are all, I insist, silly mistakes. Here's a more complex mistake. The mistake begins with a particular fascination with languages and translation. Some think that sentences mean what they mean in virtue of the roles they play in a language. If that is right, then it might be difficult—even impossible—to find a uniquely best translation of one language into another. Even worse, translation might be impossible. And if that's correct, the argument goes, then there's no determinate way (and perhaps no way at all) to translate the moral principles stateable in one language into another. If there's no way for someone speaking a different language to mean what we mean by our moral sentences, then there's no way for that person to have the moral beliefs we have. Now the argument for the indeterminacy of translation, as well as the argument for the more interesting thesis that languages are incommensurate—is complicated and contentious. I think those arguments fail, but showing that would require much work. Fortunately, we need not enter that fray because moral relativism doesn't follow from either thesis. If nothing in some other language means what our moral language means, it doesn't follow that the speakers of that language have a different morality. What follows is that they have no morality at all. After all 'morality' is a word in our language. If no word in their language means what 'morality' means in ours, then they simply have no moral beliefs at all. And they wouldn't be unique since mountain lions (my favorite example) have no moral beliefs either.

Perhaps, though, your love of relativism is not born of argument, but of compassion. Perhaps you think that we should be tolerant of the beliefs of others. Perhaps you think that we should be tolerant of the practices of other cultures. And perhaps you think that anyone arguing as I have for moral objectivism could not share your belief that we ought to be tolerant of others. But that is false. I too believe that we ought to be tolerant of others. Indeed, I believe that everyone ought to be tolerant of others. But you can't consistently believe that and be a relativist. On that, I'll leave you with a final don't. **Don't endorse contradictions.**

Michael Watkins