
Book Reviews

Moral Relativism: A Reader

Paul K. Moser and Thomas L. Carson, eds.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, ix + 337 pp., \$45.00 h.c. 0-19-5131290-0, \$25 pbk. 0-019-513130-4

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This most recent collection of contemporary philosophical essays edited by Paul Moser and Thomas Carson shares certain characteristics with another collection of essays edited by Moser—his *Empirical Knowledge* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), now in a second edition. Although the subject matter of the two collections is obviously different, the organization of both is much the same. Each collection divides the essays into a number of thematic groupings, an excellent bibliography accompanies each thematic grouping (collected at the end of the book), and both books have a fairly extensive index. The beauty of such an organization is its user-friendly nature for students and others doing research and writing. If you are familiar with this earlier anthology of Moser's and liked its organization, you should like the organization of this latest anthology on the subject of moral relativism as well.

Aside from the difference in subject matter, there is another significant difference in the two collections. The twenty contemporary selections found in *Moral Relativism* are generally accessible to a wide range of readers, including college undergraduates studying a variety of academic disciplines outside of philosophy. *Empirical Knowledge*, on the other hand, was much more geared to the needs of upper-level undergraduate philosophy majors and graduate students. Given the prominence of moral relativism as a topic in moral philosophy, as well as the current general public interest in the subject of moral relativism, an accessible collection such as this one is very welcomed.

The editors group the book's essays into six main headings: 1. General Issues; 2. Relativism and Moral Diversity; 3. On the Coherence of Moral Relativism; 4. Defense and Criticism; 5. Relativism, Realism, and Rationality; and 6. Case Study on Relativism. The book also opens with a rather long (twenty-one pages) general introduction that lays out some of the main issues addressed in the selections to follow and provides a summary of those selections. As with the index, this introduction strengthens the value of the book as both a teaching and research tool.

Many of the selections themselves should be familiar to those teaching moral philosophy. For example, the first section includes "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism," a chapter from James Rachels's *The*

Elements of Moral Philosophy, 3rd ed. (McGraw-Hill, 1999), Richard Brandt's "Ethical Relativism" article entry from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1967), and Karl Popper's chapter on "Facts, Standards and Truth: A Further Criticism of Relativism" from his book, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, 1971). Other familiar selections collected here are: "Anthropology and the Abnormal" by Ruth Benedict; "The Meaning of Right" by W. D. Ross; "Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence" by David Lyons; "Fear of Relativism" by T. M. Scanlon; "Is There a Single True Morality?" by Gilbert Harman; "Non-Relative Virtues" by Martha Nussbaum; "The Subjectivity of Values" by J. L. Mackie; and "Relativism Refuted?" by Richard Brandt.

The book concludes with a kind of case study on relativism, Loretta Kopelman's "Female Circumcision/Genital Mutilation and Ethical Relativism." Presenting a detailed description of the ritual of female circumcision and its consequences to women as currently practiced in Northern Africa and Southern Arabia, Kopelman sees this practice as a test case for versions of ethical relativism that would sanction the ritual on the basis of societal approval. Cataloging the pain and suffering such circumcisions cause, she concludes that "ethical relativism—the view that to say something is right means it has cultural approval and to say it is wrong means it has cultural disapproval—is implausible."

All in all *Moral Relativism* would make an excellent primary text for an undergraduate course in moral relativism. It is also an excellent secondary text for any course on moral philosophy, and has merits as a research tool for undergraduate and graduate students alike. The collection of essays provides a balanced and fairly comprehensive introduction to the major issues surrounding the question of moral relativism. It should be noted, however, that, with only a few exceptions, most of the essays are not generally sympathetic to either normative relativism (the view that one's moral requirements depend on the society they find themselves in) or meta-ethical relativism (the view that no moral judgments are objectively true or false). Scanlon's "Fear of Relativism" (from *Virtues and Reasons*, Oxford, 1995) and Mackie's "The Subjectivity of Values" (from his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin, 1977) are the two main exceptions. While I am not personally troubled by this general bias against moral relativism as a plausible moral theory, others may not be so unconcerned. Nonetheless, undergraduate students, who often tend to fall into a facile kind of moral relativism, will benefit from the readings in this collection and the challenges to moral relativism they present.

Sooner or later, any course in moral philosophy must deal with the issue of moral relativism. Moser's and Carson's collection provides an excellent introductory tool for addressing this topic.

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