In Defence of Moral Realism: Examining Harry J. Gensler's Critique of Cultural Relativism and Subjectivism

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Logos I – Philosophy

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1. Introduction

In his work *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction,* Harry J. Gensler discusses the nature of morality, the foundation of moral values and the methodology of moral judgement and ultimately critiques cultural relativism and subjectivism. Part A of this essay will address Gensler's critiques and further explain the problems and contradictions within cultural relativism and subjectivism. Subsequently, Part B of this essay will aim at defending Gensler's understanding of relativism and subjectivism and claim that these are invalid and irrational systems for morality. Rather, moral realism will be explored as an alternative nature of morality. In pursuit of this aim, I will suggest that moral realism is the most valid and philosophically sound system of morality by presenting the arguments from (i) moral progress, (ii) moral disagreement and moral semantics and (iii) moral experience.

2. Cultural Relativism and Subjectivism

2.1 Cultural Relativism

Within cultural relativism (CR), moral principles are based on social conventions which are relative to a particular culture or society. In other words, X is good if X is "socially approved".[1] It is concluded in CR that objective truth regarding morality does not exist.[2] The two arguments in

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[1] Harry Gensler, *Ethics,* (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2017), 8.; James Rachels and Stuart Rachels, *The Elements Of Moral Philosophy,* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 16.

[2] Ibid, 9.

support of CR are (a) the existence of cultural differences and (b) moral codes being a product of culture.[3] Subsequently, Gensler offers objections for both arguments.

Argument (a) makes the assumption that the world is divided into societies which are unified in their morality. Gensler counters argument (a) by asserting that in reality, the world consists of societies with intersecting groups and cultures which have various moral perspectives within the same society.[4] This means that in a given society, there may be individuals who differ from the majority regarding a moral issue, and CR disregards this possibility. Moreover, argument (a) ignores what he calls the "subgroup problem", the notion that individuals belong to multiple societies.[5] Following from the premise that X is good if it is socially approved, there appears to be a contradiction if one society approves of X, but the other society disapproves of X. For instance, if my religious society disapproves of killing the unborn, but my national society approves of killing the unborn, which society should I refer to? Furthermore, the argument that (b) morality is only a product of culture, ignores other factors such as "individual difference, logic, biology, religion and developmental psychology" which influence morality.[6] At face value this argument has merit, however Gensler asserts that even if a moral code was the product of culture amongst other factors, it could nevertheless express objective morals regarding how people ought to live. Therefore, through appealing to consistency, objections of arguments (a) and (b) for CR have made it evident that relative morality is an invalid system of morality.

2.2 Subjectivism

In subjectivism (SB), moral principles are the product of the subject. In other words, X is good if I like X.[7] SB values individualistic preferences like desires or feelings, however, since feelings easily fluctuate SB becomes susceptible to many objections. Like the subgroup problem, SB faces the "divided-self problem" which concerns the idea that individuals may have multiple feelings simultaneously.[8] For instance, what if I like the feeling of drinking heavily, but I dislike the negative health effects that accompany heavy alcohol consumption, which feeling should I follow? Moreover, considering the premise that X is good if I like X, it follows that any action –

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid, 12.
[5] Ibid, 13.
[6] Ibid, 15.
[7] Ibid, 23.
[8] Ibid, 27.

regardless of its effects on others in society – is good if I desire it even if such desire came from ignorance. For example, if I like hurting others, hurting others is good. Through rationality, it is clear that hurting others is not good and that following SB, in which no preference is objectively correct or incorrect, is an irrational system of morality which may result in the demise of society.[9]

In order to be charitable to the argument of SB, Gensler considers the ideal-observer view (IO). In IO, moral principles are based on desires from a rational view and an impartial view, being with equal concern for everyone.[10] In other words, X is good if X is desired from a completely rational and impartial view. This means that unlike SB, IO does not accept moral values which originate from ignorant views such as the 'hurting others' example, making it much more difficult to refute. Nevertheless, Gensler offers three objections to IO, firstly being that the concept of an ideal observer with full rationality and impartiality is impossible to achieve as humans will always be biased.[11] Secondly, Gensler objects the notion of impartial concern by questioning what it constitutes; should I have the same concern for my child and for a stranger, and is this extent of impartiality good?[12] The final objection is regarding IO's two "rationality conditions", being knowledge and impartiality.[13] It begs the question that to become an ideal observer, should I possess other rationality conditions such as empathy? Do other human ideal observers decide such rationality conditions, and what if they disagree? Ultimately, through these objections, it is evident that IO is an irrational moral system for society as it is unachievable and has no practical application.

3. Moral Realism

a. Moral Realism

Analysis of Gensler's critiques of CR and SB – moral systems which reject objective morality – has demonstrated that CR and SB are irrational and ineffective moral systems for society. Rather, a moral system which supports objective morality appears to be superior, this being moral realism. Moral realism claims that moral values generally are existing objective truths,

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[9] Ibid, 26.
[10] Ibid, 27-18.; Rachels and Rachels, *The Elements Of Moral Philosophy,* 11.
[11] Gensler, *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction, 30.*
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

independent of cultural or individualistic beliefs.[14] It will henceforth be argued that moral realism is a more rational moral system through the arguments of (i) moral progress, (ii) moral disagreement and moral semantics and (iii) moral experience which I find provide a convincing argument for moral realism.

b. The Argument from Moral Progress

The argument from moral progress follows this logic: 'if moral realism is false, moral progress would not be possible – moral progress is possible, therefore moral realism is true'.[15] Put simply, moral progress would only be reasonable if society was moving closer to an objective moral standard. For instance, abolishing slavery is considered as moral progress. However, if moral principles are not objective and instead dependent on cultures (CR), slavery could just be considered a cultural difference and the idea of moral progress would be futile. Similarly, if CR were true, we would not be able to consider relief from Nazi culture as moral progress since morality is determined by societal norms, and the social norm in Germany was to be intolerant to certain groups of people.[16] Ultimately, if CR were true, we could not say that other cultures are wrong, we could not say that our own culture is wrong, there would be no moral mistakes to correct and moral progress would not be possible.[17] Having said that, in society we do regard matters such as decreasing sexism and increasing tolerance of religious diversity and racial diversity as moral progress. This, therefore, demonstrates that moral realism is true.

c. The Argument from Moral Disagreement

Moreover, the argument from moral disagreement follows this logic: 'if moral realism is false, people would not have moral disagreements – people do have moral disagreements, therefore moral realism is true.[18] In other words, the occurrence of moral disagreement suggests that a moral principle cannot be both good and not good, proposing that objective morality is true. In reality, people act as if there are objectively binding morals through moral disagreement rather than simply

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[14] Kevin Michael DeLapp, *Moral Realism,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 17.; Geoff Sayre-McCord, "Moral Realism (Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy)", https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-realism/, (2015).

[15] Andrew Fisher, *Metaethics,* (London: Routledge, 2014)*,* 58.

[16] Rachels and Rachels, *The Elements Of Moral Philosophy,* 19-20.

[17] Ibid, 21.

[18] Fisher, *Metaethics,* 59.

accepting an alternative moral view because it is 'subjective'.[19] For instance, if a friend stated that genocide is moral, most people would disagree and passionately state that genocide is immoral. However, most people would not disagree with my subjective individual feelings such as 'I am sad' and counter that by saying 'no you are not'. This indicates that subjectivism is not an accurate representation of reality whereas objective morality is. Furthermore, the language utilised in such moral disagreements such as 'right' and 'wrong', 'moral' and 'immoral', 'ought and 'should' or statements such as 'this is not fair' would have no meaning if society accepted SB as a moral system and if moral realism were false.[20] Therefore, the argument from moral disagreement and its semantics strongly point to the existence of objective moral principles and moral realism.

d. The Argument from Moral Experience

Additionally, the argument from moral experience follows this logic: 'if moral realism is false, people would not live like objective moral facts exist – people do live like objective moral facts exist, therefore moral realism is true'.[21] In reality, people embody moral principles by following their surface intuition and immediately know what is right or wrong. Just as people do not intuitively mistrust their five senses regarding their experience of the physical world, people do not assume scepticism or subjectivism in their moral experiences.[22] An objection to this claim comes from CR which rejects the idea of a universal intuition that motivates moral decisions by identifying cultural differences. For example, Gensler provides the following example: 'Society A claims it is moral to kill elders with the intention to promote their welfare in the afterlife, but society B thinks this is immoral. Therefore, it follows that there are no objective moral facts'.[23] At first, this argument seems valid, however the conclusion does not follow from the premise. In fact, society A and B's disagreement stem from differences in their factual beliefs rather than moral beliefs, as both societies share the *basic* moral value that the welfare of elders in our society must be encouraged.[24] From this, it is clear that even in societies with extreme cultural diversity, people share the same basic moral norms and show intuitive moral knowledge. Therefore, through moral experience, it is evident that humans possess a universally shared moral knowledge. Such unity is

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid, 60.
[21] Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 32.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Gensler, *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction, 30.*
[24] Ibid.

significant as this indicates the existence of a binding system of values or a common framework which contains objective moral principles, meaning moral realism is true.

4. Conclusion

Concluding, this essay has demonstrated that certain natures of morality such as cultural relativism and subjectivism, including views such as the ideal-observer view, are invalid and irrational moral systems for an effective society. Instead, utilising Harry J. Gensler*'s Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* among other sources, the arguments from moral progress, moral disagreement and moral semantics and moral experience were extracted and utilised to support the existence of moral objectivism and realism as the most philosophically valid system of morality. Studying metaethics and the nature of moral realism has extremely significant implications as if moral facts did exist, they must be grounded in something, possibly something non-natural or supernatural. Ultimately, moral philosophy contains profound value as it may enrich our critical thinking skills, re-evaluate our moral values and allow society to address morality on a personal, professional and global scale.

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