

# Limits of Moral Relativism

---

Joseph Grcic<sup>1</sup>

---

**Abstract:** Talcott Parsons' analysis of the social system and the AGIL paradigm can show the necessity of certain foundational values and the limits of moral relativism.

**Keywords:** moral relativism, Parsons, AGIL paradigm, adaptation, goal attainment, integration, pattern maintenance, virtues.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Philosophy Dept., Indiana State University, 200 North Seventh Street Terre Haute, Indiana, USA, jgrcic@indstate.edu*

One central dispute in ethics today is the rise of the theory of moral relativism of which there are several forms. Descriptive or cultural relativism is the factual claim that there are disagreements about morality in different cultures and different times even within one culture. Ethical relativism is the normative view that moral norms depend on social systems for their existence and nature and that there is no one correct rational morality or set of value for all societies. Metaethical relativists argue that the meaning of moral terms such as 'good' and 'right' have meaning only within a given cultural framework and that two different incommensurable cultural frameworks so that one cannot rationally judge another society's moral values. Ethical relativism is often a consequence of epistemological relativism and postmodern skepticism that there can be no objective or universal knowledge in any human endeavor including ethics.

There are several justifications offered for moral relativism. First, there is the fact of cultural relativism, that different societies have had and continue to have different moral codes and practices. There are many examples in history of moral practices many today would probably find immoral—cannibalism, human sacrifice, slavery, bribery, racism, and sexism. Can these controversies be resolved rationally? Relativists claim they cannot and offer several reasons. One reason for relativism is the lack of an agreed upon foundation for ethics. Some use religion, other reason and still others human nature to base ethics on but there is no agreed upon theory. Relativism is also partly based on the omnipresent power of socialization and social conditioning where members of a society are indoctrinated to accept the beliefs and values of their own society unquestioningly.<sup>2</sup>

Relativism of any kind in the extreme form does not appreciate the fact that there are similarities in core values and virtues found across all stable cultures. These virtues and values are a function of the universality of human nature, human needs and the common problems societies must solve to survive. The differences that do exist in moral norms are limited and arise due to different social and historical contexts and ideologies which shape moral norms to some degree. But these differences are secondary when compared to the larger common foundation of core values based on common human nature and problem which must be solved for communities to survive.

Contrary to relativism, analyses of various seminal texts, authors, traditions and cultures show the existence of universal values and moral virtues. Studies of varied traditions as Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Platonism, Aristotelianism, and others show the prevalence of some universal core virtues which contradict relativism, at least in its absolutist form. A brief explanation of the chosen approach of understanding ethics from the perspective of virtues to the other remaining approaches, namely deontology and teleology, is needed. Deontology such as that of Kant is a rationalistic view of ethics which rejects any role for emotions and is based on the view of ethics on the nature of the intentions formed and the duties accepted. Teleological ethics of such as the utilitarianism of John S. Mill, understands ethics as based on the consequences to happiness caused by actions.

Virtues are character traits or habits of action which, according to virtue theory, define the moral person. Virtue theory accepts the importance of intentions and consequences but rejects as rationalistic and unrealistic view of ethics in the other approaches and sees ethical actions as combining reason and emotions. Virtue theory sees being ethical as not just deducing specific acts from abstract principles but having a type of character with sound judgment to respond correctly to varied complex circumstances. Virtue ethics is open to using the findings of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology and other disciplines to clarify

---

<sup>2</sup> *Benedict, Ruth, Patterns of Culture, Oxford Univ., 1934, pp. 23-26.*

morality and understand the lived context of human action and how moral behavior is generated.

Six foundational virtues have been discovered to play central roles in cross-cultural traditions and societies.<sup>3</sup> These virtues are not defined in exactly the same manner in all cultures but there is a common core meaning. The virtues are: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence and wisdom. Courage is defined as the rational response to fear and has three main aspects, physical, moral and psychological. Physical courage is form of courage wherein one overcomes the fear of physical injury or death to save others or one. Moral courage means to hold to one's moral beliefs in the face of attacks, concerns the ability to endure and confront personal mental or physical illness, or difficult situation.

The virtue of justice concerns fairness and giving to people what they deserve or merit. It means the proper distribution of rights and duties or treating equals equally and unequals unequally.<sup>4</sup> What criteria are used to define equal and unequal vary to some degree but there is a common understanding that a society needs to follow rules where individuals are treated consistently in their work and behavior. Justice is necessary for the harmonious relations among persons and a belief in the legitimacy of the political system.

The virtue of humanity concerns altruistic behavior actions of generosity and kindness. Actions here go beyond the demands of justice and concern empathy and concern for others to reduce their suffering. Here one finds the application of the golden and silver rule of reciprocity and the like.

The virtue of temperance concerns moderation in the pursuit of pleasures associated with eating, drinking, sex and the like. The virtue of temperance involves the ability to monitor and control one's emotions and behavior in order to preserve one's health and maintain good relations with others.

The virtue of transcendence concerns the belief in a larger purpose beyond self-interest. Transcendence rejects cosmic nihilism, that life has no meaning, and affirms, whether in explicitly religious or non-religious means, the value of human existence and the value of the community.

The virtue of wisdom is perhaps the most basic virtue. It is defined as having knowledge of the basic truths of life and the ethical application of this knowledge to real life situations. Wisdom is good judgment about the uncertainties of life and has been defined as practical intelligence where one maximizes not just one's own good but the interests of relevant others in balanced and harmonious way. Wisdom incorporates the insight that knowledge, defined as justified true belief, is a kind of map of reality and as such is a necessary presupposition for the success of any human endeavor. Hence wisdom presupposes truth and communication presupposes truth and without communication there is no social order or trust. Without social order and trust a society cannot exist for long

Moral norms and virtues are the solution to the problem of maintaining social order among members of a species who have social and anti-social tendencies. Moral virtues channel human impulses and actions into ordered relations with the actions of others. They constitute a structure of instrumental rules or guidelines which define appropriate means for the achievement of human ends in a social environment. Moral norms correspond to necessary

---

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, C., Martin E.P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Oxford, pp. 12-23.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cambridge, pp. 33-43.

social structures wherein a group of individuals with some anti-social tendencies continue to exist as a society with minimal conflict and inefficiency in meeting the needs of its members.

Anti-social activity is due to many factors. The scarcity of desired objects (food, wealth, etc.) differences in class, ideologies, the dependency of persons and their vulnerability to attack by others all can play a role. Moral norms and their internalization as virtues are the solution to persons seeking the satisfaction of their needs in a social context without producing the Hobbesian state of war of all against all. Moral norms constitute the 'glue' that counteracts the centrifugal forces of unlimited and irrational self-interest. Moral norms limit the area of the unknown and unpredictable, reducing the frustration of expectations and minimizing conflict.

There are numerous kinds of societies in existence and potentially innumerable ones which will exist in the future. Some sociologists have plausibly argued that societies must perform certain functions to continue in existence with minimal violence and disorder.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, Parsons has argued, in short, that society is a system of interrelated processes each which perform an essential function for the maintenance of the whole. According to Parsons, for a society to survive as a society it must successfully perform four necessary functions, adaptation, goal attainment, socialization and integration.

Just as individuals must adapt to survive so too a society to exist must adapt to its environment and solve problems. To adapt it must gain knowledge of its environment and make changes in the social system to enable the society to continue to survive and function in a rational manner. Adaptation and problem solving require knowledge and collective efforts require decision-making and cooperation to implement decisions. Cooperation requires communication which in turn requires a rule requiring truth-telling in at least most collective endeavors; random lying would eliminate trust and produce social chaos. Simply put, survival implies knowledge and cooperation, and knowledge implies adherence to truth and rejection of lying. Here the virtue of wisdom is clearly operative.

All stable and enduring social systems provide for group survival by successfully competing with hostile social groups and by allocating resources, extracting the necessities of life from the environment and producing the goods and services required. In addition to an efficient economy, for adaptation to be successful, the political structures must establish a monopoly of power and control a certain territory where the members of the community live to defend against hostile groups and control internal criminal elements. The virtue of wisdom is a necessity in the ability of a community to adapt is enhanced by the expansion of the knowledge base and the resulting development of new technology can play a pivotal role in controlling the physical environment and extracting new resources to provide for social needs. Karl Popper's idea of social existence as essentially problem solving is essentially relevant here.<sup>6</sup>

According to Popper, all societies confront obstacles in meeting their needs, whether at a societal or institutional level, hence problem solving must be a key dimension of successful societies. Popper added to this claim his uncontroversial contention that human knowledge is incomplete in all areas, including politics. He reasons from these two facts that a rational society, i.e., a society which acts on the basis of knowledge or warranted beliefs and takes the most efficient means to achieve ends, is one which seeks to maximize problem solving capacities and therefore one which must also maximize knowledge acquisition. Such a society

---

<sup>5</sup> Parsons, Talcott, *The Social System*, Harvard, pp. 154-65.

<sup>6</sup> Popper, Karl, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Chicago, pp. 254-67.

Popper called an 'open society,' a society which values education and knowledge and is receptive to new ideas, all necessary elements of problem solving and knowledge expansion.

Truth is a presupposition of knowledge which is a presupposition of the virtue of wisdom. However, the norm preferring truth-telling does not arise by nature alone but must be a product of appropriate socialization. Human beings, because of their rationality and ability to organize and learn, are remarkably plastic and capable of adapting to a diverse range of environments. What adaptations and changes are made, their effectiveness and how they are implemented is in part determined by the nature and effectiveness of socialization, the complex psychological and social processes which transmit the cultural system from one generation to the next. The virtues of wisdom and humanity and transcendence are necessary for the process of socialization, the transference of knowledge to the new generation. Socialization presupposes an accurate representation of reality or knowledge, which is the basis of wisdom.

One purpose of socialization is the creation of sufficient motivation of the members to support and maintain the beliefs and values of the social system. This is primarily generated by the family and school system which will include the inculcation of moral values which deal with the proper relationship between members and the regulation of means to achieve goals. The internalization of ethical virtues and customs are central for legitimacy and social control where the majority of individuals accept the basic structure of the community, and work to support it against enemies internal and external to it. The socialization or internalization and institutionalization of these basic values and beliefs are the necessary conditions for social functioning. Proper socialization enables the curbing of potentially disruptive drives and channeling them in a socially appropriate manner.

For socialization to be successful, a society must produce, nurture and educate new members of that society. Sexual expression must be allowed but must conform to social norms. The values implicit in this context are the encouragement of some form of family unit, the prohibition of the killing and violence against in-group members (except when socially sanctioned, such as self-defense) and the production, nurture and socialization and training of infants. Without reproduction and nurture, societies would obviously cease to exist and without socialization into the cultural system would cease to function efficiently, be maladaptive and incapable of confronting hostile groups.

Adaptation and socialization are necessary for survival which in turn necessitates the realization of certain goals if the existence of a society will be more probable. Goals can be political, military, economic or social. Here all the key virtues are relevant. First, wisdom requires that societal goals must be logically articulated, consistent, reasonable and rationally prioritized. Secondly, members of the given society must be sufficiently motivated to pursue collective goals such as the production of necessary goods and services and defense against enemies. Here the virtues of courage and justice are clearly relevant.

To perform these functions successfully the political system must be perceived as legitimate. Legitimacy is the idea that the power wielded by the government is perceived by the majority of the populace as morally and legally justified and applied for the common good. This is a key component of the virtue of justice and transcendence. Transcendence, the connection to a higher purpose, is essential if social goals are to be reached. The virtue of humanity or compassion contributes the social glue which reduces social conflict and tension. Clearly temperance, the control of natural appetite is also necessary to reduce conflict, and promote the health of members. And courage is essential for the successful completion of all challenging activities. To control fear and react rationally to difficult circumstances are essential for goal attainment.

Integration concerns the regulation and coordination of the main institutions of a rational society so as to minimize conflict, maximize efficiency and maintain sufficient unity to act as a group. This is achieved primarily by a common language, religion, family structures, customs and virtues. Societal integration implies all the virtues especially that of wisdom, justice, humanity, transcendence and temperance.

Wisdom is essential for knowledge and its proper application is essential to all social action. And wisdom shows that there are two mechanisms for integration, socialization and social control through promulgation of law and its enforcement. In socialization, the cultural patterns are internalized by individual members of society which, if successful, motivate members to generally conform to social norms and customs. Adequate socialization seeks to avoid cultural patterns which weaken the necessary degree of order by demanding too little of its members or by making impossible demands on society and thereby creating conflict.

Integration is a necessary function of the political system which formulates, promulgates, interprets and enforces legal norms. An integrated society must promulgate norms viewed as legitimate to regulate human interaction. The implementation and enforcement of these norms require an adjudication process provided by a court system to resolve conflicts between members where the virtue of justice is necessary.

The evidence shows that the universality of some virtues is not a coincidence but a necessity for social order, survival and individual flourishing.

## References

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cambridge, 2000.

Benedict, Ruth, *Patterns of Culture*, 1934.

Confucius, *Analects*. Trans. Watson, Burton, New York: Columbia University Press 2007.

MacIntyre, A., *After Virtue*, Univ. Notre Dame Press, 1981.

Peterson, C. & Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Oxford 2004.

Popper, Karl, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge, 2006.

Parsons, Talcott, *The Social System*, Routledge, 1991.

Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1971.