

## DISCUSSION

Matti Häyry

### Moral relativism and the philosophical criticism of other cultures

In a recent issue of *Science Studies* Ilkka Niiniluoto defends the view that nature and morality provide drastically different frames of application for the philosophical doctrine of relativism.<sup>1</sup> While, according to Niiniluoto, all forms of the doctrine regarding nature, truth and reality must be abandoned, morality in its turn allows for what he calls "modest relativism". By the latter point Niiniluoto means that all moral judgements are relative to ethical theories or cultural entities such as societies and communities. Niiniluoto does not, however, accept the idea that immoral practices in other cultures could not be legitimately criticized. Modest relativism does not imply defeatism in moral issues.

My aim in this note is to argue that although Niiniluoto's conclusion concerning moral relativism and the possibility of ethical criticism is sound, his reasons for reaching this conclusion are at least partly flawed. The validity of moral arguments is not dependent on the "progressive" nature of morality, as Niiniluoto suggests, but on the non-relativity of truth in ethical as well as in nature-related matters.

#### "Moral progress" and its problems

Given that modest ethical relativism is valid, as Niiniluoto claims, it would seem to follow that the moral judgements of different cultures and of different eras cannot be compared and assessed. If this were true, it would be impossible to state with confidence that slavery is wrong, or that young children should not be circumcised for religious or cultural reasons. After all, there have been — and are — societies and communities in which practices like these have been considered morally acceptable.

Niiniluoto, well aware of the potential difficulties of thoroughgoing ethical relativity, specifies his relativistic position by arguing that moral systems can in fact be assessed by objective criteria, and that modest relativism is in fact compatible with the view that morality is improvable by time, or is "progressive". Starting from the premise that morality is a developing social construction, Niiniluoto writes:

Moral systems can be evaluated and compared in terms of higher-order principles

(such as consistency and universalizability) which are explicated in philosophical ethics. Personal and collective experiences, and critical conversation of the humanity, have taught us to give better and better articulations of the conditions of good human life. These lessons are codified in such agreements as the Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations.<sup>2</sup>

If Niiniluoto's observations are valid, the difficulties of ethical relativism referred to in the above seem to disappear. The Declaration of Human Rights, which to Niiniluoto seems to be one of the highest culminations of morality to date, explicitly prohibits slavery and slave trade in its article 4. Moreover, involuntary circumcision could presumably be described as torture or inhumane treatment, which are both banned under article 5 of the Declaration.

But the points presented by Niiniluoto can be challenged in many ways. To start with, it is not altogether clear why the twentieth-century articulation of the "conditions of good human life" by the United Nations should be preferred to the eighteenth-century American Declaration of Independence or the nineteenth-century Communist Manifesto, or to classical accounts such as Aristotle's theory of human nature in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is possible, of course, that some of these earlier declarations and theories fail to condemn practices like slavery and involuntary circumcision. But it would be a vicious circle to define "moral progress" in terms of certain specified condemnable actions, when the "condemnable actions" in question have already been defined by reference to one particular moral system — the morality which the majority of Westerners intuitively regard as the most advanced.

A literal reading of Niiniluoto's text can be seen to offer an independent justification for preferring modern moral ideas to the ideas of the past. According to him, "personal and collective experiences and critical conversation" gradually teach humankind to formulate better moralities. But the problem with this argument is that experiences and debate have taught different lessons to differ-

ent sections of humanity. While slavery and torture have been eventually abolished in the affluent West, some Islamic nations in the Near East have during the past few decades reintroduced cruel and mutilating punishments like whipping and dismemberment. On historical grounds alone, it is impossible to differentiate between the levels of advancement of these two mutually incompatible but equally contemporary moral systems.<sup>3</sup>

Niiniluoto's point concerning what he calls "higher-order principles" is, however, more promising. Moral systems can certainly be evaluated and compared in terms of general philosophical axioms, such as the principles of consistency and universalizability. But even if these axioms in themselves can be regarded as universally acceptable, their application hardly leads to the sanctification of political documents like the Declaration of Human Rights. Twentieth-century agreements concerning basic human rights and liberties tend to result in ideological compromises, and the step from compromise to self-contradiction is notoriously short in international affairs. The Declaration of Human Rights is a case in point. Consider, for example, the case of religious traditions like the circumcision of young girls. As I have already noted, article 5 of the United Nations' Declaration can be employed to condemn circumcisions as instances of torture and inhumane treatment. Given an appropriate interpretation of article 18 of the same document, however, everybody has a right to observe the religious traditions of one's community. If it is accepted that mutilation can be a part of religious customs and rites, as it undoubtedly can be, the Declaration of Human Rights both condemns and protects circumcisions for religious reasons. The application of higher-order ethical principles does not seem to support Niiniluoto's views about moral progress.

#### **The relative absoluteness of philosophical ethics**

These remarks do not, however, imply that cultures and moral systems could not be crit-

ically evaluated and assessed. Once Niiniluoto's references to historical progress and to the Declaration of Human Rights have been deleted, the role of philosophical ethics in moral criticism can be seen in a different light. Despite the acceptance of modest relativism in moral matters, dubious ethical judgements can be philosophically criticized on at least three accounts.<sup>4</sup>

First, when practices like slavery and involuntary circumcision are defended by reference to cultural differences, one can always question the factual validity of the defence. Is it really true that there are societies in which slavery and mutilation are considered desirable? By whom are they considered desirable? Are slavery and circumcision actually consented to by those subjected to the practices, and if so, is their consent free, considered and uncoerced? If, for instance, young children wish to be mutilated because they would otherwise be ridiculed or despised by other children, the decision is, evidently, neither sufficiently free nor uncoerced.

Second, it is possible to challenge the consistency of the practices, norms and prohibitions prevailing in a culture as a whole. There may be societies, for example, in which female circumcisions are condoned although cruelty towards women and children is legally banned. In a case like this, the critical philosopher can point out that since the moral code of the society is self-contradictory, the requirement of consistency prevents rational individuals from accepting any of the dictates of the system.

Third, if these internally-oriented critiques prove to be ineffective, the moral system under consideration can be conceptually extended. While it is true that moral judgements are always relative to ethical theories or shared opinions, it is by no means the case that only existent sociocultural entities could be studied by moral philosophers. As Niiniluoto noted in the passage quoted above, there are certain "higher-order" principles, such as the principle of universalizability, which are, or ought to be, accepted by the majority of sane adult human beings.

Theorists who are inclined towards absolutism usually claim that these ethical axioms are in fact acceptable to all people at all times. This view is almost indistinguishable from absolutism, and, due to historical development and cultural differences, beyond empirical or conceptual proof. Another possibility is to claim that all sane, adult human beings who are alive now share certain ethical assumptions. This claim may be correct, but only in a very general sense. For instance, everybody may agree that the moral principles we employ must apply in a relevantly similar manner to relevantly similar beings in relevantly similar circumstances.<sup>5</sup> The problem is that the "relevant similarity" of manners, beings and circumstances varies considerably from one moral system to another. Finally, it is possible both to restrict and to extend the scope of one's criticism simultaneously, by concocting theoretical communities whose members share certain philosophical assumptions. An example would be the totality of individuals who accept any theory of universalizability which does not condone slavery nor circumcisions. Arguments based on this shared assumption should attract converts even in societies which in reality sanction the practices under attack.

It seems, then, that there are many ways to criticize dubious practices in other cultures, even if modest moral relativism is accepted and the idea of moral progress rejected. It is possible, of course, that those defending practices like slavery and involuntary circumcision remain untouched by my arguments. They may believe that ethical principles need not be consistent or universalizable, and they may wish to define concepts like "cruelty" and "freedom" in a way that would back up their views. But the fact that some theorists have set out to defend suspect policies does not prove that those policies could be supported by viable moral systems. If the critics have constructed their inferences in the manner that I have indicated above, their main argument is that the defenders of slavery and circumcision are wrong from any viewpoint which is open to

them. And if the critics have formulated their arguments with sufficient care, their conclusions are true statements concerning the opinions and beliefs held by the defenders themselves. Finally, since truth is non-relative (as Niiniluoto explains in his article), a successful criticism of immoral practices states in fact an absolute — if limited — truth concerning the relative realm of morality. My conclusion is that this “relative absoluteness” of philosophico-ethical judgements, not the alleged progressiveness of morality, is what justifies the criticism of other cultures in controversial normative matters.

## NOTES

1. Niiniluoto (1991).
2. Niiniluoto (1991), p. 20.
3. It could, of course, be argued that there has been little or no *critical* discussion in the Islamic world. But the validity of this argument depends on the definition of ‘critical discussion’. And this definition, in its turn, is a philosophical matter, and connected to Niiniluoto’s ahistorical point, which will be examined below.
4. The following points have been previously introduced and explained in Häyry (1987), Häyry and Häyry (1988), Häyry (1990), pp. 11–15, 38–48.
5. This is one general form of the principle of universalizability.

## REFERENCES

- Häyry, H. and Häyry, M.  
1988 “Filosofian asema jälkiteologisessa normatiivisessa etiikassa” (“The role of philosophy in post-theological normative ethics”, in Finnish). *Ajatus, The Yearbook of the Philosophical Society of Finland* 45, 190–193.
- Häyry, M.  
1987 “Mitä on soveltava etiikka?” (“The nature of applied ethics”, in Finnish). *Ajatus, The Yearbook of the Philosophical Society of Finland* 44, 162–175.
- Häyry, M.  
1990 *Critical Studies in Philosophical Medical Ethics*. Helsinki: Department of Philosophy, University of Helsinki.
- Niiniluoto, I.  
1991 “What’s wrong with relativism?” *Science Studies* 4, 17–24.

Matti Häyry  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Helsinki  
Unioninkatu 40 B  
00170 Helsinki  
Finland

## Ilkka Niiniluoto

## Improving morality — a reply to Matti Häyry

In his comment on my paper about relativism (this journal, p. 53–56), Matti Häyry seems to read too much into my few lines about moral progress. But the issues he raises are important, and it deserves to be examined whether there really are some differences in our viewpoints.

The view I have called “modest moral relativism” claims that morality is a social construction, and moral judgements (i.e., statements that something is good/bad, right/wrong) are always relative to ethical theories or human communities. But, in spite of the rejection of moral absolutism, “radical relativism” does not follow: all moral systems are not equally well justified, and immoral practices in other societies can (at least in some cases) be legitimately criticized.

This is a view that Häyry shares with me. His question concerns the ways and grounds “to criticize dubious practices in other cultures”.

This question has an interesting analogy in the field of science. According to the social constructivists, scientific theories or accepted belief systems do not represent, or correspond to, some independently existing external reality. Hence, the truth value of

scientific statements is always relative to theories or communities. In my view, this doctrine is in fact mistaken and based on confusions (see Niiniluoto, 1991a). Be this as it may, it is in any case interesting to ask whether such modest relativism about truth implies radical relativism (“anything goes”). Are there, for a constructivist, legitimate ways to criticize dubious beliefs in other scientific communities or laboratories?

Returning to morality, Häyry interprets me as claiming that the validity of moral criticism is *dependent* on the progressive nature of morality. In fact, I only asserted something much weaker: “unlike radical relativism, modest relativism is compatible with the idea of moral progress” (Niiniluoto, 1991b, p. 20). Here I am using the concept of progress in the weak sense:

(WP1) Some moral systems are better than some others.

To bring in the temporal connotations of progress, WP1 can be reformulated by

(WP2) Some later moral systems are improvements of some earlier ones.