

Student Relativism: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

Brian Talbot

“Right and wrong are just a matter of opinion.” “What’s right for you may not be right for me.” “Who are we to judge others’ actions?”

All of us who teach ethics courses hear these and related sentiments expressed on a regular basis. They signify that students have adopted one of a group of views I will call *student relativism*; I’ll call students who endorse these views, tacitly or otherwise, *student relativists*. Having student relativists in the ethics classroom can be problematic. The sort of moral relativism often accepted by student relativists seems to undermine the value of studying ethics in a philosophical manner. If one accepts this sort of moral relativism, the answers to ethical questions seem easy to find, and one seems to have little reason to think rigorously about ethics, discuss the subject with others, or study ethical theories. Other student relativists see ethical judgments as so subjective that the answers to ethical questions are difficult or impossible to investigate rationally, again giving them little reason to think rigorously about ethics or engage with the ethical thoughts of others. Thus, student relativists are hard to teach, and can potentially disrupt the teaching of other students as well.

One common reaction to this problem is to try to convince students to reject moral relativism. This approach is advocated in, for example, Carson, 1999, Goldman, 1981, Callcut, 2006, (debatably in Momeyer, 1995, as well) and is implicit in the discussion of moral relativism in a number of textbooks (discussed below). This approach goes beyond the normal classroom practice of presenting arguments against a view; when a professor tries to *convince* a student of a position, it is important to the professor that the student accepts the arguments given, not merely understands and thinks about them. In this paper, I will present an alternate approach to dealing

with student relativists. This involves not worrying about whether or not our students are moral relativists. One treats students who accept relativism just as one would treat students who accept other moral theories one disagrees with. One may give arguments against the students' view, but does not try to convince the students with these arguments. Instead, we help students to see that being a moral relativist still requires rigorous thought and philosophical discussion about ethics and ethical theories. By showing that rational thought and discussion about ethics is useful even if there are no objective moral truths, this approach also responds to those who see rational investigation of ethics as futile. It has been my experience that this approach is easier and more successful than trying to convince student relativists to abandon their position. I will argue that this is likely to be the case in classrooms beyond my own. Additionally, this approach avoids possible non-pedagogical problems that can arise from trying to convince students of the falsity of relativism.

The Goals

Good pedagogy is generally goal-oriented: we do what we do in the classroom largely because it is the best way of accomplishing our teaching goals. Because of this, explaining the approach to student relativism I am advocating requires first explaining the goals the approach is supposed to accomplish. And that, in turn, requires some discussion of what student relativism is and why it is problematic.

In discussions of teaching ethics to relativists, a number of views are often mentioned under the heading of "moral relativism."¹ Some of these – such as the views that what is right or wrong depends in part on situational factors or certain sorts of facts about individuals – are not the objects of much worry among teachers. This is in part because these views are quite likely

true; the moral status of pulling someone's tooth, for example, probably depends on situational factors such as consent or whether the tooth is really rotten, and individual factors, such as whether or not the tooth-puller is actually the dentist they claim to be. This is also in part because students who possess these views don't pose a particular teaching challenge in virtue of having them (unless, I suppose, they are full-blown particularists).

The primary concern about moral relativism seems instead to be about the belief that what is morally right or wrong, good or bad, for some person is determined by what that person believes to be morally right or wrong or good or bad (in the case of individual moral relativism) or by what that person's culture holds to be morally right or wrong or good or bad (in the case of cultural moral relativism) (see e.g. Carson, 1999, Cornwell, 1991, Kaplan, 2000, and probably Goldman, 1981).² Since these are the foci of most discussions of student relativism, when I say "moral relativism" I will be referring to these views. To keep my sentences simpler to follow, I'll just address individual moral relativism, but my arguments and ideas should apply to cultural moral relativism with minor tweaking.³

A related view that is also sometimes discussed in papers on teaching ethics to relativists is skepticism about the ability of reason to teach us anything about ethics, or to convince others of what we might have learned about ethics (Momeyer, 1995, possibly Goldman 1981). This skepticism might be generated by the same concerns that motivate moral relativism: because of the amount of disagreement on moral questions, and because moral judgments seem so subjective, it might seem impossible to some students to make progress in the moral realm. Let's call this view *specifically moral skepticism*, to distinguish it from a moral general skepticism about knowledge and reasoning. The approach I give in this paper will also help one to teach specifically moral skeptics.

One might be concerned with students who espouse a more general sort of skepticism about knowledge or reasoning. This paper isn't really about teaching those students. One can't solve every problem in a single paper, and an approach that addresses the relativist probably won't work for general skeptics who aren't motivated by the worries about subjectivity and disagreement that are on the relativist's mind. In any case, general skepticism about *all* reasoning is a pretty hard view for students to maintain, and students who really commit to it are likely to be few and far between. After all, it's hard to say that reasoning cannot help humans make progress in the face of the technology that surrounds us. When students seem to doubt reasoning in general, it's more likely that they really are just skeptics about the use of reasoning to solve *philosophical* problems. In that case, we can treat them (for the purposes of this paper) as specifically moral skeptics and show them that progress *is* possible (at least in the moral realm) through the use of reasoning.⁴

So, in the rest of this paper, when I say "student relativists" I am talking about students who accept, tacitly accept, or claim to accept, moral relativism or specifically moral skepticism, although my focus will be on moral relativists.

What are the concerns about teaching student relativists that we need to address? Among the important goals of an ethics class are the following: getting students to engage with ethical questions, to question their own views, to learn to think better about ethics, and to *want* to think better about ethics. These goals are hard to accomplish if students think ethical questions are easy to answer, relatively trivial, and pointless to discuss, and these attitudes are exactly what we expect from moral relativists. To see why this is, consider what are, *prima facie*, consequences of moral relativism. If ethical facts are determined by facts about what one believes, then it seems very easy for people to determine what the ethical facts are, and ethical questions are not

the sort of thing one needs to think about rigorously or at length. If ethical facts are determined by facts about one's own beliefs, or one's own culture, then there does not seem to be much point in discussing ethical questions with others, since there does not seem to be much one can learn about ethics from others.⁵ Further, since it seems so easy to figure out what is right or wrong for oneself, debate seems fruitless: it will be relatively rare that others are incorrect about their own ethical standards, so there is little possibility of convincing them that they are wrong. There also seems to be little point to studying ethical theories, since, given relativism, there is not much about ethics that these theories can teach a person.

Similarly, if students think, as the specifically moral skeptic does, that ethical questions are (close to) impossible to answer and that it is pointless to try to convince others of the truth of any ethical matter, the above-mentioned goals are also difficult to accomplish. If progress in ethics is impossible because of the amount of disagreement and the subjectivity of judgment, why bother thinking carefully about one's own or others' ethical views?

So, if students are student relativists, it is likely that they will not be motivated to truly learn or apply much of what is taught in an ethics class, and no professor wants to lose a significant fraction of their students from the outset. Student relativists can also disrupt other students' learning; they tend to be less productive members of discussion, to move discussions onto unhelpful tangents, and to lower the value other students perceive in what ethics classes teach. Of course, there are other reasons to be concerned with student relativism. One might, for example, believe that relativism is false. However, disagreement in the philosophy classroom rarely presents as much a cause for concern as does student advocacy of relativism, and so I think that doubts about the truth of relativism are not the primary source of teachers' concern about student relativists. In what follows, I will treat addressing the pedagogical problems raised

by student relativists as the primary goal that determines our approach to student relativism.

If my suggested approach to student relativists is a good one, it must give student relativists a reason they can and will accept to think critically and rigorously about their own ethical views; it must give student relativists a reason they can and will accept to engage in philosophical discussions about the views of others; and it must give student relativists a reason they can and will accept to study moral theories.

The Method

The method I advocate, in a nutshell, is this: do not try to convince students that moral relativism is false. Instead, show them that even moral relativists should engage with ethics in the ways we teach in our classrooms. I endorse either remaining agnostic about relativism, at least in so far as one presents oneself to students, or treating it as a view that people can reasonably disagree about. This approach is similar to one Michael Goldman (1981) discusses and rejects. However, Goldman claims that this approach must be motivated by an acceptance of moral relativism (or moral anti-realism). I disagree. My motivation is purely pedagogical and ethical. I believe that one gains much and loses nothing as a teacher (practically and morally) by not trying to advocate against moral relativism.

The negative aspect of this approach – not trying to convince students of the falsity of moral relativism – is simple to understand, but only works if we can also show student relativists why moral relativism does not make ethics easy, or obviate the need to engage with the ideas of others. So, this positive part of the approach deserves the bulk of our discussion. Here is a rough sketch of the positive part of the approach: we help students to realize that they often do not know what they themselves believe, and that often what they *think* they believe is not what they *in fact* believe. Understanding one's own beliefs requires deep and careful thought, and one

often best learns what one believes by discussing issues with others. Further, one's beliefs can be in tension with each other, and it is important even to the moral relativist to resolve these tensions, which requires systematicity and rigor. This means that, even if moral relativism is true, ethics is difficult and relativists and non-relativists alike must approach it in a similar manner. This opens up the possibility of productive debate, since one can sometimes truly show others that what they *took* to be morally right or wrong is not in fact what they actually believe. Finally, it shows that, even if moral judgment is subjective and disagreement is frequent, we can establish some criteria for rationally making and criticizing subjective judgments, and through it make moral progress.

How do we show all of this to students? I believe that the most effective way of teaching students is to, in some sense, have them teach themselves. In what follows, I will show how students can be brought to articulate the above, and to realize that they already believe everything I have just said about moral relativism.

Every student I have ever met has a story of a situation in which they or someone they know did something that at first seemed right (or wrong), only later to realize they were incorrect in their first evaluation *from their own perspective*. That is, in the given situation, it turned out that the agent never did endorse the action in question, despite originally thinking they did. And every student can relate to the idea of self-deception: of claiming, even to one's self, a belief that they do not in fact possess, typically because that is in their own interest. Getting students to tell such stories, or even just putting them in mind of such stories, is a good way of bringing them to the realization that what one believes is not always obvious or easy to determine.

Further, every student has seen that their own beliefs, or another's, are sometimes in conflict with each other, even if that conflict is not always obvious. Real-life illustrations

abound. Students are typically familiar with people who endorse hard line “pro-life” positions about abortion, arguing that *all* life is sacred, while still advocating for the death penalty.⁶ Holding these views at the same time is typically problematic, and the problems are easy to see, and relativism does not make such contradictions acceptable. The rare student who initially claims otherwise will usually acknowledge that we cannot act consistently with all of our contradictory beliefs, so that, given the connection between morality and action, contradictory moral beliefs are to be avoided. Tensions are not always easy to find, since even if one’s apparent beliefs seem consistent, one’s reasons for those beliefs can be in conflict. This is of course the lesson of examples like that of the person who is anti-abortion and pro-death-penalty. There is nothing inherently contradictory about being against abortion but for the death penalty; the contradiction arises when one tries to reconcile their reasons for opposing abortion with their acceptance of the death penalty.

So, students already know that one’s beliefs, or reasons for belief, can conflict; they can cite personal examples of this; and they can tell us that what one believes is not always obvious, nor are the tensions between belief and/or reasons. This makes it relatively easy for students to see that being a relativist does not release them from a need to be rigorous and systematic in their examination of ethical questions. To figure out what is right or wrong for oneself, one must not consider their superficial beliefs, but rather their actual beliefs, *and* the reasons behind these. That is, one must make arguments for their beliefs, and then see how they fit rationally with their arguments for their other beliefs. This applies with equal force to the moral views of others: one cannot simply say, “Fred seems to believe such and such is wrong, so it is wrong for Fred.”

This is something that we can convince students of fairly quickly and with minimal argument or controversy, since it involves taking what every student already accepts and

showing them how it leads to exactly the conclusion they have previously denied. While I think that helping students to initially see this is relatively easy and painless, this is not by itself an instant fix to the problem. It is very helpful to return to this discussion from time to time in the classroom. For example, students will of course quite often contradict themselves, or be uncertain of their own stance on an issue. Highlighting this, in a non-confrontational way, and tying it back to the discussion of relativism, helps make sure student relativists continue to see ethical practice as worthwhile.

Method versus Goals

Let's look at how this method addresses the worries I raised about student relativists in ethics classes. The worries, again, are that student relativism seems to undermine the need for rigorous thinking and argumentation about ethics, it seems to undermine the value of considering or arguing about the moral views/reasons/principles of others, and seems to devalue learning ethical theories such as Utilitarianism or Kantianism.

The given approach to student relativists makes salient the point that one's beliefs are often not obvious, and that what one thinks they believe about morality can conflict in important ways with other of one's beliefs. This means that, in order to figure out what is right and wrong, the student relativist needs to consider on a very deep level a great number of their beliefs, both moral and non-moral, and understand how they relate to one another. This will often involve articulating reasons for moral claims, and trying to give general moral principles that support claims about specific cases. After working through a couple of ethical issues, student relativists will not only understand the need for this on an intellectual level, they will also *feel* how important it is, as they experience tension between their own moral beliefs. We can demand reasons from students relativists just as much as we can from non-relativists, and student

relativists can see the need to give substantive reasons (beyond “That’s what I think.”) as much as can non-relativists.

Student relativists can also be motivated to engage with the moral views of other people, whether they are other students or people outside the class (for example, they can be motivated to consider whether or not terrorist acts are acceptable for *terrorists* to commit). It is possible for the relativist to show that someone else’s claims are wrong, since the fact that someone *seems* to believe that X is good does not imply that X actually is good from that person’s point of view. If a student relativist wishes to criticize some specific moral view of another person, they need to consider what that person’s other beliefs are likely to be, whether or not they would endorse their views on reflection, and whether or not there is conflict between their beliefs. Student relativists will need to ask themselves about the reasons or principles upon which others’ moral beliefs might be based, and whether or not these can possibly be in accord with other moral beliefs that that person explicitly or implicitly manifests.

This can actually change the shape of class discussions on moral issues for the better. When non-relativist students encounter moral views with which they disagree, they find it relatively easy to say that these views are wrong. Since these criticisms can be based on non-shared principles, discussions can sometimes look less like arguments and more like contradictions (to paraphrase Monty Python). On the other hand, in order to criticize the views of others, student relativists need to find grounds for criticism that the other would accept. This is not easy, but it is exactly the sort of criticism that we *want* students to be engaging in. This certainly is the way philosophers are supposed to criticize each other; one does not argue against Kantians by simply asserting that their views contradict Utilitarianism. Rather, one gives counterexamples that the Kantian themselves will find compelling, or finds some internal

inconsistency in the Kantian view. Since this is somewhat difficult, it may be somewhat hard at first to motivate students to do. This is definitely a surmountable teaching challenge. Once student relativists see that it is possible, and sometimes effective, to debate with others on their own terms – partly by seeing how well it works when a teacher points out their own inconsistencies – they will find it exciting. Moral debate is much more satisfying when one feels that it can have some traction on the people with whom one is debating (even if only hypothetically).

We can also show student relativists that they have something to learn from discussing moral issues with others. By being exposed to other moral beliefs, they may discover beliefs of their own that they did not know they had, or be motivated to adopt new beliefs. Other students can help relativists refine their moral systems. And engaging in discussion with others is practice for straightening out one's own views. By pointing these benefits out, and making them salient through one's lessons, we can motivate student relativists to do the hard work of understanding and addressing others' ideas.

Finally, let's consider how accepting relativism affects how we teach moral theories to students. If the goal of teaching moral theories is merely to have students understand what people like Mill, Aristotle, and Kant said (perhaps so that they can go on to graduate school with the necessary background), then there is no reason to worry about student relativism. Even student relativists care about getting good grades. However, I imagine most of us teach these theories partly in the hopes that students seriously consider them. We may not wish to convert our students to one or the other, but we hope that students think about the kernel of truth each theory has, and the implications of this kernel for their own moral decision-making. In order to accomplish this goal for any student, relativist or non-relativist, we need to make these moral

theories seem plausible. We have to motivate the theories based on ideas that our students share, and that they can be brought to realize they share. For example, the first formulation of the categorical imperative, when simply stated, sounds crazy to most students. However, these same students can see why a) it is desirable to find moral truths which apply to everyone (so that we can talk ethics with people who seem not to agree with us), b) fairness is important, so that if something is right for me to do, it would be right for anyone to do (in the same circumstances, at least), and c) the rational person should avoid self-contradiction.⁷ A student who agrees with these can see some force to the first formulation of the categorical imperative, even if they ultimately reject it. This, then, shows us that, if we can effectively teach moral theories to student non-relativists, we can also effectively teach them to student relativists. While it can be challenging to present moral theories in a way that motivates students to seriously consider them, this is a challenge we face whether or not we convince students to reject relativism.

How does this approach reach the specifically moral skeptic? Remember, the specifically moral skeptic doubts our ability to acquire or transmit moral knowledge because they see disagreement as too prevalent, and judgment as overly subjective. Their worry is that no one can learn moral facts if they are merely making a subjective value judgment to which no standard can be applied, and no one can convince another of a moral claim through argument if disagreements are just like differences of opinion that cannot be resolved. As we've just seen, the method I am advocating responds to all of these points. I'll summarize: the approach shows how a person can come to learn something about their own views by careful analysis and discussion, even if these views are based in purely subjective judgments, it shows that even subjective judgments can be criticized, it shows that criticism requires careful attention and analysis, and it shows that criticism can motivate change. There *is* an objective and shared standard to use in evaluating

beliefs, which makes it possible to actually make progress in the face of disagreement and subjectivity, and possible to help others to see the progress that has been made.

Advocating for this Method

As we have seen, the approach to student relativism under discussion should be effective in addressing pedagogical concerns about the presence of student relativists in our classes. There are, of course, a number of other methods for addressing student relativism, and different ones will be effective for different teachers. I will argue here that the method I am advocating, while no cure-all, is particularly likely to work. There are also ethical, not just pedagogical, reasons that weigh in favor.

As discussed above, the standard method for dealing with student relativists is to try to convince them of the falsity of moral relativism. To see why I think this is likely to be less effective than my proposed alternative, we must ask, “Why are so many college students moral relativists?” There are reasons to think that this is a natural stage that many, or all, people pass through as they develop their capacity to think morally (see, e.g., Kaplan 2000, Perry 1970). Even if moral relativism is not the product of a stage of cognitive development, given the number of students who are relativists, relativism is probably not a purely rational, reflective stance on the part of students, but rather something that they come to due to life experiences and the influence of their peers and the media. If either of these accounts of why students are often moral relativists is true, student relativists are not likely to give up their views due simply to rational debate and discussion; a variety of stimuli and forces will need to act on students – both at the conscious and unconscious levels – over an extended period of time in order for students to change. If we give students reasons to think relativism is false, we should expect those reasons to take time to affect them, if they do at all. Trying to convince students to give up relativism

may bear fruit, but it will often not have an impact on *our* classrooms, and so it will not address our worries about teaching ethics to relativists.

We are also unlikely to convince student relativists that moral relativism is false because the normal practice of philosophical ethics – the way we argue for and against views, the way we engage with ethical questions – will seem to the layperson to *confirm* moral relativism. This is not a criticism of standard philosophical method; my point is rather that teaching students to do philosophy as it is actually practiced (which I am for) undermines attempts to convince students to abandon moral relativism. To see why, consider some of the more common arguments discussed in introductory ethics classes, such as those involving one of the innumerable trolley cases (e.g. Foot, 1978), Judith Jarvis Thomson's argument in defense of abortion (Thomson, 1971), or one standard criticism of the categorical imperative. Arguments from trolley cases typically involve scenarios in which someone is given the choice to kill one innocent person or to let some number of others die. Thomson describes a case in which one is, against their will, used as a human life-support machine for a famous violinist. And one standard criticism of the categorical imperative is that it forbids lying, even to Gestapo agents who are searching for the Jew one is hiding. Each of these arguments (and of course I could have cited a great number of others) describes a situation and asks for our intuitive reaction to it – whether we feel that it is right to kill one person to save others, that it is wrong to unplug oneself from the violinist, or that morality demands we not lie to the Gestapo agents. These arguments then use our intuitions as evidence for or against some moral claim. Such appeals to intuitions are common in ethical argumentation; it is not a stretch to say that they are one of the cornerstones of discussion of normative ethics.

To non-philosophers, appeals to intuitions look a lot like appeals to opinions or prior

beliefs. For example, when Thomson says, “I imagine you would regard this [the suggestion that you cannot unplug yourself from the violinist] as outrageous, which suggests that something really is wrong about the plausible-sounding argument [against abortion] I mentioned a moment ago,” (Thomson, 1971, reprinted in 2005, p. 92-93) it *sounds* like she is saying, “Your opinion or belief that this is outrageous is evidence about some moral fact.” This looks like the sort of thing a relativist would say. Of course, most philosophers who appeal to intuitions are not relativists, and do not take themselves to be appealing only to opinions or beliefs to support their arguments, but it is difficult to explain to students why the use of intuitions is not a tacit adoption of relativism. The line between intuitions and opinions or beliefs is not easy to make clear – making it clear could easily take a semester by itself. It is also not entirely clear why intuitions are evidence about moral claims at all (there is significant debate amongst philosophers on this very issue). So it is quite difficult to explain how appeal to intuition is somehow a different and more justified way of getting access to moral facts than is appeal to opinions or beliefs. So any discussion of ethics that involves asking students for their reactions to cases, or appealing to “obviously true” moral principles (which, being obvious, are often not given any supporting evidence), is going to look like a discussion based on purely subjective reasons to someone who does not already accept that intuitions can be good evidence about non-subjective moral facts. As professors teach ethics, they undermine their own attempts to convince students of the falsity of moral relativism.

Because student relativism is not always adopted purely on the basis of rational reflection, and because it is superficially supported by standard philosophical method, attempts to convince student relativists to abandon their view are likely to not succeed, or not succeed fast enough to alleviate the pedagogical problems raised by student relativists. Thus, these problems

would be better solved by a method that doesn't rely on convincing students of the falsity of relativism.

Some Gentle Criticisms

Putting effectiveness to the side, there are two reasons I am uncomfortable with the idea of trying to convince students of the falsity of moral relativism. Before I discuss these reasons, I should make it clear that here I am not talking about presenting arguments against relativism; this is obviously appropriate in a classroom devoted to helping students think about and engage with ethical issues and views. My concern is with professors trying to *convince* students to not be moral relativists; attempts to convince occur when it is important to the professor that the student accept the arguments given, not merely understand and think about them.

My first concern is that, given the evidence currently available, reasonable people can be moral relativists. I am certainly reluctant to say that moral relativists such as Gilbert Harman (1975) and David Wong (1984) are not reasonable. We should be uncomfortable with the idea of trying to *convince* students to abandon positions that are defensible. Now, the sorts of relativist positions that can be defended, and the defenses that can be given of them, often require a high degree of philosophical sophistication, and are not often articulated by undergraduates. This is beside the point. Even if the versions of moral relativism explicitly endorsed by some of our students are incoherent, it is our job as professors to be charitable when working with our undergraduates. If a student holds a position which is not coherent as stated but could be made coherent with minor changes to how it is formulated, we ought to help them formulate it coherently or interpret it so as to make it coherent, unless we are given very strong evidence that the student is deeply committed to the incoherent version.⁸

In support, I'll quickly illustrate how a standard argument against student relativism is

not a good argument against a charitable understanding of the position. I won't spend too much time on this, as this is not a paper on moral relativism itself, but about issues with teaching to relativists. But I do want to briefly illustrate the sort of thing I am talking about, and how common it is. The most popular argument against moral relativism seems to be that relativism does not imply that we ought to be tolerant of other peoples' moral views.⁹ The argument in its simplest form is "Moral relativism cannot value tolerance as a general principle (because moral relativism cannot endorse any general moral principles)..." (Momeyer, 1995, p.309), or "[Moral relativists] cannot plausibly explain why we *ought to be tolerant* of other peoples' moral beliefs." (Carson, 1999, p.170) The professor might point out that a relativist (call her Mary) could believe that others' moral views are perfectly true for them while still believing that it is right for Mary (given her personal views) to coerce others to behave in accordance with Mary's views (Cornwell, 1991 gives an example much like this). The assumption behind this argument is either that we ought to be tolerant of others' moral beliefs, and so any viable moral view at least needs to be consistent with this claim and possibly to give evidence for it, or that student relativists think we ought to be tolerant of others' moral beliefs, and so are being inconsistent by endorsing relativism.

This sort of argument only works against the philosophically naïve. Let's assume that it is correct that student relativists believe, "We ought to be tolerant of others' moral beliefs." In fact, we can assume that it is *true* that we ought to be tolerant of others' moral beliefs. This is not necessarily a problem for the moral relativist. There are many types of "ought" claims – there are moral ought claims, but there are also prudential ought claims, legal ought claims, and ought claims made from the standpoint of etiquette, among others – and it is a truism that what one ought to do in one sense can conflict with what one ought to do in another sense. One can

make “ought” claims from a rational, or epistemic, standpoint. This standpoint is concerned with what one has reason to think is true. From this standpoint, if moral relativism is true, it is plausible that one ought to be tolerant of others’ views, since those views are as likely to be true as your own (this is something like a *rational* duty to be tolerant).¹⁰ So, moral relativism *can* potentially explain why we ought to be tolerant of the moral beliefs of others, and it is perfectly consistent for students to be relativists and think that they should be tolerant.¹¹

Given that reasonable people can hold some form of moral relativism, there are probably decent responses that a student relativist could make to attacks on moral relativism, if we gave them some help. It’s problematic to try to *convince* students using arguments that we know can be responded to. I also want to raise another worry that applies to some, but not all, attempts to convince students to give up relativism. Some attempts to convince students of the falsity of relativism do not live up to the standards we want our students to learn. In fact, sometimes they violate norms of good philosophy and teaching. Let’s look at some examples:

Most of the introductory textbooks on philosophical ethics that I have close to hand attempt to dismiss or to cast aspersions on moral relativism with rhetorical devices they do not use in discussing other ethical views. Here are quotes from two of them:¹²

[Individual moral relativism] is one of the weakest moral theories... As a theory, it does not provide a correct explanation for why certain actions are wrong... Cultural relativism is based on faulty reasoning... Cultural relativism encourages blind conformity to cultural norms rather than rational analysis of moral issues...

Ethical Relativism and Doublethink [this is a section heading]. The simplicity and popularity of the two types of ethical relativism theories make them particularly seductive... [This text goes on to talk about how to “move beyond” moral relativism] (Boss, 2005, p.6 –10)

As for ethical relativism, there is a great deal of confusion generated by the vague (and unfortunately popular) talk of morality being relative... Now relativism has its popular allure. Some people seem to take ethical relativism as an enlightened view about the true nature of morality... Granted, the members of some group may honestly *think* that genocide is morally right, but thinking something is right does not *make* it right. Right? (Timmons, 2007, p.32-33)

The word choices made in these quotes, and other language used throughout the discussions of moral relativism, are clearly aimed at steering students away from this “seductive” theory with rhetoric at least as much as argument.

For another example, consider Michael Goldman (1981). He endorses using what he calls “logical sleight of hand...” to help convince students to reject moral relativism (Goldman, 1981, p.4; Goldman’s suggestion is endorsed by Momeyer, 1995, as well).¹³ Goldman’s approach is predicated on the view that many student relativists embrace moral relativism out of a sense of iconoclasm, and involves getting them to think that moral relativism arises due to cultural forces so as to motivate them to turn against the position. He says:

“Whether or not this is the correct explanation [of moral relativism], the very fact that the issue is raised at all in this way immediately renders the students’ relativism open to doubt to them, and that is a major achievement in itself. To the extent that a student fancies himself or herself a social critic or rebel, ... [this] may actually turn him or her

against [relativism] —the student may come to perceive it as some sort of capitalist trick!” (Goldman, 1981, p.5)

This, and the rhetorical devices above, strikes me as disrespectful of students. Using techniques that one regards as tricks, not to get students to think, but to get them to adopt a specific new position, is potentially an abuse of our (presumably) superior intellectual position. Even if it can sometimes be justified, it is certainly nothing that we should aspire to, and if it can be avoided it ought to. Goldman goes on to argue that what he calls “advocacy,” and I call trying to convince students, is an unavoidable part of teaching philosophy. I do think that it is inevitable that we try to convince students of things – the importance of critical thinking for example – and I also think it can be good to passionately defend a position that we believe in (to show, for example, that people *do* care about ethics), but I do not think it is inevitable or good that we try to change students’ minds based on “reasons” we ourselves understand are insufficient or inappropriate. Further, since my approach to student relativists involves no advocacy whatsoever (it requires only pointing out to students what they already accept), Goldman’s claim that advocacy is inescapable is certainly undermined with respect to addressing student relativism.

Conclusion

No teacher wants their students to think that what they are learning in class is pointless or uninteresting, or to think that there is no good reason (other than their grade) to seriously engage with the questions raised, or to employ the methodologies taught, in class. Students who embrace moral relativism are students who are in a position to think exactly that about their ethics classes. One standard reaction to these students is to try to convince them that moral relativism is false, or that they should not accept it. This is difficult to do because of student

psychology and because the practice of ethics seems to confirm moral relativism. Further, trying to convince students of the falsity of relativism can potentially violate norms of good teaching. Fortunately, there is an alternative approach which is both effective and encouraging of excellent teaching: ethics professors should stop worrying about student acceptance of moral relativism, and should instead show student relativists that they actually already want and need to engage in ethical questions in a philosophical manner.

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¹ Moral relativism is also called “ethical relativism.” Throughout this paper I use the term “moral” and “morality” as if they were synonymous with “ethical” and “ethics.” Nothing in my arguments hinge on this, however.

² One might also have the very similar view that moral properties or facts are not relative, but rather the truth of moral statements is relative. The distinction between these views is not important for this paper.

³ Another view related to relativism is moral nihilism, the view that all moral claims are false (other than this one), and not even subjectively or relatively true. The method I advocate in this paper would not help one teach a committed nihilist, but I’ve never met a student who was a nihilist. Worries about student relativists in the literature do not seem to be worries about true nihilism, but rather about those who think just that no moral claims are *objectively* true.

⁴ Students are also sometimes skeptical about our ability to know anything, usually after learning some modern philosophy but little contemporary epistemology. This sort of skeptic doesn’t pose the same set of problems as the specifically moral skeptic or the moral relativist. They raise their head in every philosophy class, and I’m inclined to say that the approach to them should be relatively constant – point out that knowledge does not require certainty, and then point them in the direction of an epistemology class.

⁵ At least, there is not much a point to discussing ethics in a philosophical manner. One might want to get straight what one’s culture says about an ethical question, but this is more sociology or anthropology than philosophy.

⁶ Of course, there are ways of consistently being against abortion and for the death penalty,

but there are plenty who are not consistent in these views, and students are generally well aware of such people.

⁷ This is not an attempt to give Kant's own argument for this formulation, just a way of motivating it for those who are initially skeptical.

⁸ See Cornwell (1991) for someone who seems to advocate convincing student relativists that they are incorrect by pointing out incoherencies in their position, without trying to interpret their views charitably.

⁹ Arguments of this sort are given in MacKinnon, 2004, Cornwell, 1991, Carson, 1999, Momeyer, 1995.

¹⁰ One might wonder if what I say here makes sense if a student is a specifically moral skeptic. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this question) It does, with minor modifications. Let's understand the duty to be tolerant as the duty to think that others' beliefs are just as good as one's own, or just as likely to be true than one's own. The specifically moral skeptic should think that, since all moral beliefs are unjustified, their moral beliefs (if any) are no better than anyone else's. Does this give a rational duty to be tolerant? Most likely, the skeptic thinks that believing that one's beliefs are better than those of another is unjustified and probably unjustifiable. This means that it is epistemically wrong to hold these beliefs about one's own beliefs, and thus that one has an epistemic duty to not do so.

¹¹ Some authors who discuss this argument just talk about what we should or ought to do (e.g. Carson, 1999). Others, however, say that student relativists will claim that we *morally* ought to be tolerant (Cornwell, 1991). Some student relativists may really believe this, and they are being inconsistent. But others may really be making a claim about what we rationally should

do, as I have discussed. They may talk about moral “oughts,” but this is only because they do not have the language to make or articulate the distinction between what we morally should do and what we rationally should do. I think that it is wrong to take student relativists who say we should be tolerant, or that we morally should be tolerant, to be committed to an inconsistent position without giving them the chance to understand and articulate a more consistent position. At the very least it is uncharitable, and it also misses an opportunity to develop students’ understanding of different sorts of evaluations.

¹² These quotes are the authors and editors of these texts speaking in their own voices, not describing the views or positions of others.

¹³ It is not entirely clear to what extent Goldman thinks his approach by itself can convince students; he seems to think that for many, it will only help to open their minds to further debate, which can then convince them. He also admits that, “the honest instructor has the obligation to point out that none of the considerations articulated above are logically compelling...” (Goldman, 1981, p. 5) although he seems to say that this should only be done once his approach has had its desired effect.