Chapter 14

Relativity Applies to Physics, Not Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Ethical relativism is the most prevalent philosophical sub discipline. Ethical relativism represents that there is no moral right or wrong, asserting that morals evolve and change with social norms over a period of time. As the businesses have been growing transnational, this has become a burden rather than advantage, leading to confusion about whether to follow the host country or the home country cultural standards. Adopting the host country cultural values might end up with contradictory and inconsistent practices in the same organization whereas strictly believing in the home country culture might lead to rigidity and chaos in respective markets, forfeiting the opportunities. Thus, overcoming the mindset of ethical relativism has become a big burden on multinational businesses. Eventually, there lies a great hope for ethical universalism rather than relativism in the context of cross-cultural and diverse businesses.

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INTRODUCTION

An American politician and the 54th Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Paul Ryan once said “If you ask me what the biggest problem in America is, I’m not going to tell you debt, deficits, statistics, economics—I’ll tell you its moral relativism” (McCormack, 2011), signifying the vitality of the issue in 21st Century. Relativism has been emerging to be the most prevalent and reviled doctrines of our time, permeating the entire gamut of philosophical sub disciplines. Relativism illustrates that the viewpoint of each individual is equally valid as “each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you - you and I each being a man” (Plato, 1926). The philosophized conception that right and wrong are not absolute values, but are personalized according to the individual and his or her circumstances or cultural orientation. Relativism theorizes that truth is different for different people. This is established on the notion that there is no ultimate standard of good or evil, and every decision about right and wrong is a produce of pertinent society. For instance, the same wind could be cold to one person and hot to another. Even though relativism is of recent coinage, it roots back to the ancient Greece, as a philosophical doctrine, with some of the traces to the very beginnings of Western philosophy. In the 20th Century, the popularity of relativism owes to Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity, used by Gilbert Harman as a model for philosophical versions of relativism. Harman (1975) says that:

Even an object’s mass, according to Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, is relative to a choice of spatio-temporal framework. An object can have one mass in relation to one such framework and a different mass in relation to another. …. I am going to argue for a similar claim about moral right and wrong. …. I am going to argue that moral right and wrong …. are always relative to a choice of moral framework.

Further, many social scientists, under the influence of Karl Marx and Max Weber, assigned credibility to the idea that human beliefs and actions could be understood and assessed only relative to their socio-economic circumstances as they are highly correlated to the background of cultural presuppositions, interests and values. “I have traveled in 201 countries and the strangest thing I saw was man”, says Robert L. Ripley (Stanton, 2011), the Modern Marco Polo, who published in Believe It or Not that “one man sat and stared at the sun for fifteen years, which ultimately blinded him and made him incapable of moving his legs from inactivity. Another was buried alive for 40 days in suspended animation and survived…. Some foreign practices amuse us, such as that of Japanese men who tattoo their entire bodies. Others make us squeamish, such as a Latin American culinary practice of eating handfuls of live bugs in tortillas. But other foreign cultural practices spark a
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