Cultural Relativism and Abortion

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Section A: Cultural Relativism

Reading and examining all the ethical theories, I found the theory of cultural relativism closest to being right and moral. It is of the opinion that all ethical or moral systems are equally valid, and no one system alone can be realized as good or bad. These ethical systems vary culture-wise. Every person perceives his or her moral perceptions to be right, depending on the culture. Thus, there can't be any good or bad morality since all cultures and systems must be equally accepted and valid. People judge other's ethical codes or systems in view of their own culture. The notion of cultural relativism effectively stands out in the modern world. It has changed the meanings of terms like "tolerance," "acceptance," and "pluralism." This is because the term "culture" has expanded its margins. It has enabled the justification of almost anything due to the modern world's description of these ideas.

The theory of cultural relativism helps us comprehend the contrasting beliefs of right and wrong in the view of a specific culture. For instance, any society that considers dyeing hair green an offending act might be judged by modern societies, but looking closer at the cultural perspective of that society might change our perception regarding that specific act. If dyeing hair green were considered offensive as it was an indication of being a prostitute according to the cultural perspective, other cultures would understand that dyeing isn't an issue; it's prostitution that's considered wrong. Hence, cultural relativism enables all cultures to understand each other's perceptions, ideas, and the concept of morality. This idea of relativism and cultural differences leads us to the understanding of morality. If individuals from different cultural backgrounds do not understand or consider other cultural ethics wrong or bad, there's a need for such theory or the understanding that no good or bad exists in morality based on cultural differences.

The concept of cultural relativism does not only forbid people from criticizing or judging other's codes or ethics, but it also prevents people from criticizing their own. This isn't in the case of Divine Command Theory, according to which right is what God commands. There are so many religions existing, and all have different beliefs. Some are monotheists, some polytheists, while others are atheists. These differences then lead to an obvious conflict among the standards of morality since every individual will claim that their God says this to be right and that to be wrong.

Unlike cultural relativism teaches us how to comprehend and understand other's code of ethics, the egoism theory focuses on one's ideas, thoughts, and perceptions. It says that whatever a person feels

right is right, and whatever he assumes to be wrong is wrong. “To the question, “What proposition is there respecting human nature which is absolutely and universally true?”, Macaulay replies, “We know of only one that men always act from self-interest” (iep.utm.edu)(Rachels, 2003). Hobbes also maintains his stance that out of all the voluntary actions of a person, his or her main priority is his pleasure. This emphasis on one’s interests can’t be seen in cultural relativism.

The theory of utilitarianism suggests that actions and deeds are ethically right or wrong depending on their effects. It denies the systems of morality based on religions, traditions, or customs. Sometimes good actions can also lead to bad effects, and bad actions can produce good results. In this view, the standard is still not appropriate for morality. Kantian ethics refers to the theory of morality proposed by the philosopher Immanuel Kant. According to him, the law of morality is the basis of rationality. Rationalism decides what is right or wrong, be it any personal desire or any external principle discoverable by reason. However, reasons for actions might be misleading. Virtue ethics focuses on the character of the individual rather than the actions themselves or their outcomes. It doesn’t say anything about cultural differences.

Thus, in my opinion, the theory of cultural relativism stands close to being right and moral. It brings about the concepts of unity and understanding each other’s differences. It also induces the notion of tolerance. It teaches us to not be judgmental regarding other’s opinions, beliefs, and cultures. Knowledge of each other’s cultures, customs and traditions, and information about the code of ethics and morality induces the urge to know more about each other and make a comparison with our moral codes. Hence, there’s no fixed standard of what’s good or bad. People’s actions are good or bad in relation to cultural relativism.

Section 2: Abortion

An abortion can be defined as a procedure or a mechanism that aims to end the pregnancy before the occurrence of the birth. Abortion is different from a miscarriage. Miscarriage can be known as a spontaneous abortion in which an embryo or the fetus dies in the uterus of the mother and is then released by the body. Abortion performed later in pregnancy causes health risks to the mother. Abortions are either done through surgical operations or by means of medication. There were and still are many women who wish to end their pregnancies due to several reasons. The matter of abortion has always been an ethical or a moral issue. All the faiths have occupied a strong stance on the issue. According to them, the issue covers all the serious topics or matters of right and wrong, life and death, the nature of society, and human relationships that make it a moral or ethical concern.

The arguments regarding the concept of abortion lie in the stance that the fetus or the embryo is a living being, and whoever kills a living being is labeled as a murderer. According to Thomas, the idea of drawing a line in the development of the embryo does not make any sense since it starts developing its human characteristics with the passage of time. For instance, by the tenth week, it already possesses a face, fingers, toes, arms, and internal organs, and the brain starts working.

However, he also pays attention to the rights of the mother in which this embryo is growing. He argues that the act of abortion does not take away the embryo's right to live. Rather, it gets deprived of the support it takes from its mother's body resulting in its death. Thomas gives the right to the mother to abort her child since it's her body that the embryo will make use of to grow and develop(World Health Organization, 2022). Hence, the mother has full rights to her life and its decisions. Thomas discusses that if the doctor refuses to abort, she is depriving the woman of her right.

Marquis takes up the argument very sensibly and makes people aware that abortion is immoral in every sense. He does not take either of the two extreme positions regarding the issue. Rather, he adopts a rational and new strategy to let others know why abortion must be considered immoral. He explains that killing an adult human is commonly taken as a wrong act. This is because the killer deprives the victim of his life, possessions, dreams, goals, achievements, in short, the future life that he deserves. Depriving a person of all these things is completely a wrong deed and not at all justifiable. Similarly, when an abortion takes place, the mother deprives the embryo of its life, the food or the nutrients it requires for its growth, and its right to live in the future. Having this perception and mindset leads one to agree with the fact that abortion is immoral and an unethical act.

When I first read and learned the views and opinions of Thomas regarding the act of abortion, I was convinced that, yes, mothers must have their right to live healthily and freely, and it must be their decision whether or not to get rid of the pregnancy. However, the way Marquis presented his theory on abortion gave a thought-provoking stance. He did not show any extreme point that abortion is highly immoral or it's totally up to the mother. He carefully designed an argument and led us to the conclusion. The pieces of evidence he used to support his argument are highly convincing. We all agree that the murder of an adult person is completely wrong and unlawful because after that, he isn't the same person, nor does he have anything to survive. He gets deprived of every essentiality. In the same way, when a mother decides to abort her pregnancy, she decides to kill her child, who does have a right to live. The child, who at that stage is an embryo, gets deprived of life, food, in short, a complete future. Thus, in my opinion, the position of Marquis is stronger than that of Thomas. Abortion is and must be considered an immoral act unless there's a dangerous threat to the life of the mother.

References

Rachels, J. (2003). *The elements of moral philosophy* (4th ed.). McGraw-Hill. https://books.google.com/books?id=OWAZAAAACAAJ

World Health Organization. (2022). *Abortion care guideline*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240039483