Flavors of Cultural Relativism

- We should distinguish a *sentence* from a *proposition*. Consider the following three sentences:
  
  La nieve es blanca.
  Schnee ist weiss.
  Snow is white

  These are three different *sentences* — one is a Spanish sentence, the other is a German sentence, and the last one is an English sentences. However, they all *mean* the very same thing. They all express the very same *proposition*.

- Just as it’s possible to have two different sentences express the same proposition, it’s possible to have the very same sentence, in two different contexts, express two different propositions. If I say “I’m cold”, I’ve expressed the proposition that Dmitri gallow is cold. If Omar Al-Bashir says “I’m cold”, he expresses the proposition that Omar Al-Bashir is cold. We used the *very same English sentence* to express two different *propositions*.

- Consider now two utterances of the very same sentence, “Female Genital Mutilation is wrong” — one made by a Sudanese reformer in Sudan, the other made by James Rachels in America:

  According to Cultural Relativism, if we want to evaluate the truth of what these two people say, we must look to cultural norms. However, there are (at least) three different ways that this could be the case:

  **Truth Relativism**
  
  - Both Rachels and the Sudanese reformer express the *very same* proposition with their use of the sentence “Female Genital Mutilation is wrong”
  - From where Rachels stands, this proposition is true.
  - From where the Sudanese reformer stands, this proposition is false.
Meaning Relativism (speaker norms determine meaning)

- Rachels and the Sudanese reformer express two *different* proposition. The sentence “Female Genital Mutilation is wrong” is like the sentence “I’m cold” — what it means depends upon who says it.
  
  * The sentence “Female Genital Mutilation is wrong” is incomplete. In order to have a meaning, it must be supplemented with a moral standard. The correct moral standard to stick in is the moral standard of the culture of the speaker.

- What Rachels says is that Female Genital Mutilation is wrong according to American norms.
- What the Sudanese reformer says is that Female Genital Mutilation is wrong according to Sudanese norms.
- What Rachels says is true.
- What the Sudanese reformer says is false.

Meaning Relativism (actor norms determine meaning)

- The sentence “Female Genital Mutilation is wrong” is incomplete. In order to have a meaning, it must be supplemented with a moral standard. The correct moral standard to stick in is the moral standard of the culture of the actors whose actions are being evaluated.

- Both Rachels and the Sudanese reformer express the very same proposition: that Female Genital Mutilation is wrong according to Sudanese norms.

- Both what Rachels says and what the Sudanese reformer says is therefore false. Female Genital Mutilation is *not* wrong according to Sudanese norms.

• The second flavor of meaning relativism (actor norms determine meaning) is Rachel’s target.

• Harman develops a variant of the first variety of meaning relativism (speaker norms determine meaning).

  - However, note that, for Harman, the moral standard is not the moral standard of the speaker’s *culture*, but rather the moral standard of the *speaker* and their *audience*.

• We won’t be reading anybody who defends truth relativism. In part, that’s because it’s quite tricky to make sense of truth relativism in a way that doesn’t lead to outright contradictions. To see why this might be a problem, consider the following:
The proposition that \( p \) is true iff the world is such that \( p \) (for any \( p \)).

The proposition that \( p \) is false iff the world is not such that \( p \) (for any \( p \)).

From where Rachels stands, the proposition that FGM is wrong is true.

From where the Sudanese reformer stands, the proposition that FGM is wrong is false.

From where Rachels stands, the world is such that FGM is wrong.

From where the Sudanese reformer stands, the world is not such that FGM is wrong.

Rachels and the Sudanese reformer are standing in the same world.

The proposition that FGM both is and is not wrong is true.

This argument appears to be valid, and the truth relativist appears to be committed to all the premises, but its conclusion tells us that there is a true contradiction. That seems like a bad consequence. It’s not clear what we would have to say in order to avoid this conclusion. \( \text{P1} \) and \( \text{P2} \) seem constitutive of the very notion of truth. How could it but that the proposition that \( p \) is true without the world being such that \( p \)? How could the world be such that \( p \) without \( p \) being true? As for \( \text{P3} \) and \( \text{P4} \), these are just the claims of truth relativism. And giving up on \( \text{P5} \) seems almost as crazy as saying that there’s a true contradiction.

- We might also worry that, depending upon how the view is fleshed out, truth relativism may end up undermining itself. Consider:

  \( \text{P1} \ \text{Truth Relativism:} \) An ethical claim is only true within a culture if it is accepted by the majority of people within that culture.

  \( \text{P2} \ \text{Truth Relativism is an ethical claim.} \)

  \( \text{P3} \) The majority of people in America don’t accept \text{Truth Relativism}.

  \( \text{C} \ \text{Truth Relativism is false in America.} \)