

PHIL5090 Seminar on Western Philosophy

Moral Relativism

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While many people have found problems with moral universalism, particularly in this pluralistic and global world, “moral relativism” is often used as a term of condemnation: the easiest way to discredit a moral theory is to say that it is relativistic. In this course, we will first read and discuss the works by Gilbert Harman and David Wong, the two most prominent philosophers of those very few who have openly, seriously, and persistently identified themselves as moral relativists and defended moral relativism. Classically, relativism is divided into two kinds. The agent centered moral relativism claims that the rightness or wrongness of an action is relative to the moral standard of agent (the person who performs the action), while the appraiser centered moral relativism claims that the rightness or wrongness of an action is relative to the moral standard of the appraiser (the person who makes the moral judgment). There are serious problems with both forms of relativism. We shall examine how Harman and Wong try to deal with these problems and to what extent they succeed and to what extent they fail. In the last part of the course, we shall read the Daoist text *Zhuangzi* as presenting a benign kind of moral relativism unseen in the Western philosophical tradition: a patient centered relativism, which claims that the moral rightness or wrongness of an action is relative to the standard of the patient (the recipient of the action). Attempts will be made to show how the patient centered moral relativism can not only address the perceived problems of moral universalism but can also avoid the respective problems of the two familiar types of moral relativism.

Readings for this course are primarily in English, and the course will be conducted in either English or Mandarin Chinese depending upon the needs of students.