

A CRITICAL LOOK AT MORAL RELATIVISM

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Introduction

Relativism in morality is a widespread phenomenon. It is prevalent among philosophers, theologians, students, social activists and politicians. I intend to study and evaluate it in the following way. First I define and describe the phenomenon of relativism. Then the phenomenon of morality will be described and in the final section I will evaluate relativism.

Definition of Relativism

There are different forms of relativism. There is cognitive relativism, ethical relativism, cultural relativism and historical relativism. Cognitive relativism asserts that there is no universally valid knowledge about the world. All truths/knowledge are/is relative. They are relative to the knowing subject, place and time. We do not know the things in themselves and their qualities.¹ Knowledge is valid only from a particular point of view and no point of view is superior to another.² G. König in his article in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* writes: "Nothing is true/binding in itself but always in relation to something else" is not yet the specificity of relativism. It is rather this: That which is and valid/meaningful is dependent on the assertion of the one who experiences it and asserts it as being (seiend) and meaningful. Relativism

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¹ Cf. G. König, "Relativismus," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Joachim Ritter und Karlfried Gründer (hrsg.), völlig neubearbeitete Ausgabe, Bd. 8, Basel, 1992, 613; Joseph Venathumattam, "Relativism," in *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed., Johnson Puthenpurackal, vol. 2, ATC, Bangalore, 2010, 1156.

² Cf. G. König, "Relativismus," 614; Joseph Venathumattam, "Relativism," 1155.

interprets being and validity/meaning into/as being and meaning for someone. The absolutists, on the other hand, as the opposite direction/position, refuse to do or to undertake this relativization. They believe it possible to hold on to a 'being and validity/meaning' in itself."³

It is obvious here that truth/meaning is relative to the perceiving subject/consciousness. Truth is as it is perceived by a consciousness. Truth is as it is determined by the perceiving subject.

Ethical relativism is a corollary of cognitive relativism. Ethical relativism is the moral philosophy which denies universal validity to moral principles. These principles ultimately arise out of or are rooted in natural law or practical reason.⁴ That very rootedness is disputed by ethical relativism. The norms (terms) of good and bad are influenced by time, nationality and other external factors. Norms or values are valid for the experiencing, willing/desiring and evaluating subject under certain conditions, from a certain perspective. They are not valid for all (*allgemeingültig*), not necessary and unconditional.⁵ Accordingly, there is no one correct way of evaluating an act either as good or bad.⁶

³ G. König, "Relativismus," 620: "'Nichts ist wahr/verbindlich an sich sondern nur relative auf anderes' ist noch nicht das Spezificum des Relativismus. Es besteht vielmehr darin, dass das, was ist und gilt, als abhängig von demjenigen behauptet wird, der res als seiend bsw. gueltig erlebt oder beurteilt. Der Relativismus deutet also 'Sein' und 'Geltung' um in 'Sein bsw. Geltung fuer jemanden'. waehrend der *Absolutismus* (als Gegenposition) sich weigert, diese Relativierung vorzunehmen und an 'Sein /Geltung an sich' festhalten zu koennen glaubt."

⁴ Cf. Arno Anzenbacher, "Relativismus," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 3. völlig neu bearbeitete Aufl. (1993-2001), Bd. 8, 1031; G. König, "Relativismus," 613-614.

⁵ Cf. G. König, "Relativismus," 614. G. König is relying on *Handwörterbuch der Philosophie*, 1913; Arno Anzenbacher, "Relativismus," 1031; Joseph Venatumattam, "Relativismus," 1156. Cf. also Karl Acham, "Einheit-Differenzierung-Indifferenz: Ueber Relativierungstendenzen und Universalitätsansprüche in Wissenschaft und Moralphilosophie, in *Einheit und Vielheit: XIV Deutscher Kongress für Philosophie, Giessen, 21-26 September 1987*, hrsg. von Odo Marquard unter Mitwirkung von Peter Probst und Franz Joseph Wets, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990, 141. Cf. also Otfried Höffe, "Relativismus" in *Lexikon der Ethik*, hrsg. von Otfried Höffe in Zusammenarbeit mit M. Forschner, A. Schöpf und W. Vossenkuhl, 3, neubearbeitete Auflage, München: C.H. Beck, 1986, 205. Cf. also Bartosz Wieckowski, "Relativ/Relativismus" in *Lexikon philosophischer Grundbegriffe der Theologie*, (hrsg.) von Albert Franz, Wolfgang Baum, Karsten Kreutzer, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2003, 347-348. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht und Menschenwürde: Universale Ethik in einer geschichtlichen Welt*, Mainz: Mathias Grünewald Verlag, 1996, 78, is clearer than the others in his definition of ethical relativism: "Ihr (der These des Relativismus zufolge) zufolge sind alle moralischen Vorstellungen in dem Sinn 'relativ', daß sie den Standpunkt einer bestimmten Gruppe widerspiegeln und auf einer bewußten oder unbewußten Uebereinkunft unter ihren Mitgliedern beruhen."

⁶ Cf. Richard B. Brandt, "Ethical Relativism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., vol. 3, 368.

Ethical norms arise in a particular historical context and so are not universally valid. Thus ethical relativism is incompatible with universal human rights.⁷

Ethical principles are just conventions or customs. They cannot be proved as a scientific hypothesis.⁸

Cultural moral relativism believes that the moral norms of a culture are valid for the members of that particular culture⁹

H. Kelson, (*Was ist Gerechtigkeit*, 1953), thinks that the only value in a world of relative value theory is tolerance. In democracy (Rechtstaat) one should not use violence against another. One has every right to express one's views.¹⁰

The Ethical or Moral Phenomenon

In the light of natural reason man distinguishes between good and bad.¹¹ Good presents itself as something that ought to be, and bad as something that ought not to be. That something can appear as good is a miracle. It could be seen as an epiphany of God. The prescribing character or the "ought" character of the good is the primordial ethical phenomenon and practical reason sees it as such.¹² The difference between good and bad is in their nature. The good urges the human subject towards that which ought to be, and the bad pulls in the opposite direction. The good makes a claim on man, and he who has understood this, has understood the contradiction between good and bad.¹³

Ratio boni is that all men desire the good, i.e. all men have an attraction towards the good. Whoever understands the *ratio boni* also understands the ought character of the good, i.e. the good makes a

⁷ Cf. Arno Anzenbacher, "Relativismus," 1031.

⁸ Cf. Arno Anzenbacher, "Relativismus," 1031.

⁹ Cf. G. König, "Relativismus," 619-620; Richard B. Brandt, "Ethical Relativism," 370.

¹⁰ Cf. G. König, "Relativismus," 619.

¹¹ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 167.

¹² Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 169. Cf. also Sth I-II 94, 2. Hereafter, I-II = Prima Secundae. Sth = Summa Theologica. The "good" as "objective importance" possesses the following traits: It is important for all; its importance is intrinsic, i. e. arises out of itself; man has to respond to it or respect it; the appeal of the good is directed to the freedom of man, i.e. it leaves the human subject free to respond or not although it is in the best interest of man to respond to the appeal of the good; response to the appeal of the good elevates man to the realm of the noble and man abandons himself to the world of the good because it manifests itself as higher than man.

¹³ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 169.

claim on man. He also understands simultaneously the highest norm of morality, namely good is to be done and evil to be avoided.¹⁴ The supreme norm of natural law: do good and avoid evil, is born from or based on the ought character of the good.¹⁵

Good is to be done and evil is to be avoided. The power of the good to lead man to the good manifests itself in the judgement of practical reason urging man to realize the good.¹⁶ The validity (*Gültigkeit*) of all the norms of practical reason rests on the primordial insight (*Ureinsicht*) into the meaning (*Sinn*) of the good. This is open to all men.¹⁷ That is to say, the light of the good is available to all men.

The supreme principle of ethics or morality is: good is to be done and evil to be avoided. And that one principle is grounded in the ought character of the good.¹⁸ It is from this one principle that practical reason draws all its other individual norms.¹⁹ All the individual laws

¹⁴ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 159, 169. Cf. Sth I-II 94,2: "Et ideo primum principium in ratione practica est quod fundatur supra rationem boni, quae est bonum est quod omnia appetunt. Hoc est ergo primum praeceptum legis, quod bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum." Cf. also L. Honnefelder, "Gewissen und Verantwortung," in *Handbuch der christlichen Ethik*, hrsg. von Anselm Hertz, Wilhelm Korff, Trutz Rendtorff und Hermann Ringeling, Band 3 *Wege ethischer Praxis*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1982, 23.

¹⁵ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 170. Cf. also Sth I-II 94, 2: "Et super hoc fundatur omnia alia praecepta legis naturae: ut scilicet omnia illa facienda vel vitanda pertineant ad praecepta legis naturae, quae ratio practica naturaliter apprehendit esse bona humana. Quia vero bonum habet rationem finis, malum autem rationem contrarii, inde est quod omnia illa ad quae homo habet naturalem inclinationem, ratio naturaliter apprehendit ut bona, et per consequens ut opera prosequenda, et contraria eorum ut mala et vitanda. Secundum igitur ordinem inclinationum naturalium, est ordo praeceptorum legis naturae. Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law*, Grand Rapids, Michigan – Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005, 127 is of the view that 'do good and avoid evil' is very general to be a moral norm. This criticism appears to be very weak. One could make the same observation about the insistence of moralists that moral norms must be applicable to concrete situations. Which situation but? J. Maritain, "Natural Law in Aquinas," in *Readings in Moral Theology*, No. 7, ed. by Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991, 114-123, here 118, does not entirely agree with Jean Porter. He feels that 'do good and avoid evil' is the fundamental source or one norm from which all other norms flow. 'Do good and avoid evil' is not a concrete norm. It is the reason or motive for having moral norms at all.

¹⁶ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 169.

¹⁷ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 159.

¹⁸ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 159, 160, 169, 170.

¹⁹ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 159, 160, 170. Cf. also Sth I-II 94, 2: "Et ideo primum principium in ratione practica est quod fundatur supra rationem boni, quae est bonum est quod omnia appetunt. Hoc est ergo primum praeceptum legis, quod

of natural law, to the extent they refer to the one supreme principle of natural law (do good and avoid evil), participate in the reasonability of the supreme principle.²⁰

The presuppositions of any moral philosophy are a) the capacity of practical reason to perceive truth and, b) a substratum of human nature that remains the same through all historical changes.²¹ A genuine ethical theory must believe in the universal validity of its principles.²²

Natural Law

Natural law presupposes that there is a common human nature which is constant. It is from that human nature that ethical principles are drawn.²³ Thus the objective foundation of natural law is the nature of man.²⁴ Natural law exists before practical reason, i.e. practical reason discovers it because natural law is grounded in the basic structure of being man.²⁵ Natural law, unlike emotivism, is based on the being of man, on the nature of being man.²⁶

bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum. Et super hoc fundantur omnia alia praecepta legis naturae....”

²⁰ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 172. Cf. also Sth I-II 94, 2 ad 1: “...omnia ista praecepta legis naturae, inquantum referentur ad unum primum praeceptum, habent rationem unius legis naturalis.”

²¹ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 143. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 143, believes that theological ethics also has practically the same presuppositions: The capacity of practical reason to perceive truth, the universal validity of moral principles and individual moral principles are rationally based and not just in the decision of God or church. Cf. also Joseph Fuchs, *Natural Law*, trans. By Helmut Reckter and John A. Dowling, Dublin: Gill and Son, 1965, 118, 148-50, 162.

²² Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 298: “Eine ethische Theorie, die von der prinzipiellen Wahrheitsfaehigkeit der praktischen Vernunft ausgeht und einen universalen Geltungsanspruch für ihre Aussagen erhebt, muss sich ihrer Stärken und Grenzen bewußt bleiben. Ihre Stärke liegt darin, daß sie in ihren Ergebnissen unterschiedslos allen Individuen Völkern und Kulturen zugemutet werden kann, weil sie sich auf die Anfangsbedingungen des Menschseins beschränkt und nur den unhintergehbaren Schutzraum garantiert, in dem sich ein menschenwürdiges Dasein entfalten kann.”

²³ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 22, 13. J. Maritain, “Natural Law in Aquinas,” 114-115, simply states as understood that there is a human nature, it contains certain ends which reason discovers as good and the will has to act so as to realize the goal of human life. In addition, he states tersely that he has no time to waste in disputing the existence of an obvious human nature.

²⁴ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 20. Cf. also Joseph Fuchs, *Natural Law*, 70.

²⁵ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 13.

²⁶ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 20, 12, 16.

Natural law, or the phrase “by nature”, expresses the minimum presuppositions for being an ethical subject, that is,²⁷ reason and freedom. Without these, one cannot be an ethical subject. Natural law understood as the minimum pre-suppositions for being human is same for all, in every culture and age. These minimum conditions are protected by the negative commands of natural law.²⁸

Natural law as an ethical theory proposes principles that are valid for all people because it contains minimum indications for being human and it defends the most basic sector (*unhintergebarer Raum*) of a human being.²⁹ The minimum of natural law that is common to all men is applicable everywhere and is independent of revelation. It is available to any man as man.³⁰

Natural law as a moral philosophy is against relativism and believes in the truthfulness and universal validity of moral norms.³¹ One needs natural law to be able to criticize the ideologies of one’s society.³² In the absence of natural law one will be forced to give equal value to both cannibalism and a democratically ordered society.³³ Natural law must be the basis for individual moral laws and civil law, and it should be independent of any religious foundation. It should be accessible to any man as man.³⁴

²⁷ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 233. “...der universale Anspruch des Naturrechts bezieht sich folglich nur auf die Mindestvoraussetzungen, die in dem Phänomen des Ethischen selbst enthalten sind” (ibid.). “Mehr als die unaufhebbaren Bedingungen moralischer Selbstbestimmung und eigenverantwortlicher Lebensgestaltung enthält die von der thomanischen Lehre über das natürliche Gesetz benötigte anthropologische These gerade nicht. Es handelt sich gewißermassen nur um die Mindestvoraussetzungen, ohne die ein für den Menschen als solchen gültiger Begriff seines moralischen Handelns gar nicht denkbar wäre. Kurz: Naturrechtliche Forderungen im strikten Sinn beziehen sich auf einen Kernbestand an Daseinsbedingungen und Äußerungsmöglichkeiten, die zum Menschsein des Menschen gehören und sittliches Handeln erst möglich machen” (Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 192). ibid Cf. also Joseph Fuchs, “Absoluteness of Moral Terms,” in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 1: Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition*, ed. by Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, New York/Ramsey/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1979, 106-7, 108.

²⁸ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 233, 42.

²⁹ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 299.

³⁰ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 300. Cf. also Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, München, 3. Aufl., 1952, 326: The deepest claim of being human is common to all human beings even when it has not realized itself as a unity in concrete universal history. (English Trns.: *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. by Michael Bullock, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1953.)

³¹ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 20. It also believes against emotivism.

³² Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 15-16.

³³ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 15, 17.

³⁴ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 30.

Reason and Morality

Man obeys a law because it is reasonable. Every law must have reason in it.³⁵ The *vis obligandi* of a law (*Gesetz*) does not come from outside itself but from the internal obligating character of reason itself. According to Thomas Aquinas the *regula et mensura* of human acts is reason.³⁶ The only criterion of morality is whether a human act is according to reason or not, i.e. if reason sanctions it or not.³⁷

The origin and validity of moral values come from practical reason.³⁸ This is because it is reason that makes a law that which it is. Without reason there is no law. It is man's participation in God's reason that makes man capable of being the bearer of natural law.³⁹ Reason and its law of non-contradiction finally decide about the content of any moral system.⁴⁰ An immoral act is one that contradicts reason. It militates against reason.⁴¹

³⁵ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 165-166.

³⁶ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 165. Cf. also Sth I-II 104, 1: "Lex quaedam est regula et mensura actuum, secundum inducitur aliquis ad agendum, vel ab agendo retrahitur; dicitur enim lex a ligando, quia obligat ad agendum. Regula autem et mensura humanorum actuum est ratio, quae est primum principium actuum humanorum." Cf. also Sth I-II 104, 1.

³⁷ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 205-206. Cf. also Sth I-II 18, 8: "Actus omnis habet speciem ab objecto; et actus humanus, qui dicitur moralis, habet speciem ab objecto relato ad principium actuum humanorum, quod est ratio." Cf. also Sth I-II 1, 3 and De malo 2,4. Franz Scholz, "Problems on Norms Raised by Ethical Borderline Situations : Beginnings of a Solution in Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure", in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 1 : Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition*, ed. by Charles E. Curran and Richard McCormick, New York/Ramsey/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1979, 162, gives a good account of the relation between reason and morality. Ralph McNery, "The Principles", in: *Readings in Moral Theology, No. 7*, 143, interpreting Thomas writes: "Law is a work of reason."

³⁸ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 71.

³⁹ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 168. Cf. also Sth I-II 91, 3 ad 3: "Sed quia rationalis creatura participat eam intellectualiter et rationaliter, ideo participatio legis aeternae in creatura rationalis proprie lex vocatur: nam lex est aliquid rationis, ut supra dictum est." In the Aristotelisch - Thomanisch understanding practical reason has in addition to: überlegen, abwägen, rasonieren, has the functions of leiten (dirigere), hinführen (inducere), ausrichten (realize) ordinare und befehlen (praecipere vel imperare) (Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 165).

⁴⁰ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 70.

⁴¹ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 228. Cf. also Franz Scholz, "Problems on Norms," 162: "Reason is therefore the principle of the properly human act and omission. If human conduct corresponds to the order of reason, it is morally good; if not, it is morally evil. To categorize an act ethically one must confront it with the challenge of reason. This is the first yardstick of all moral conduct. 'Whatever is contrary to reason is against human nature.'" See also footnotes 16-19 of the same. Cf.

Universality and Natural Law

One can think about and practice a universal ethic only if one presupposes the universal validity and reach of reason in all men.⁴² There is a human nature that does not change. So too there is an unchanging natural law.⁴³

Once reason discovers a truth, it is valid for all. "It corresponds completely to the structure of historical perception of truth that such crossing of boundaries occurs in a particular time and place. Once such a discovery or crossing has taken place in the thought of the

also Joseph Fuchs, "Absoluteness of Moral Terms," in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 1*, 111.

⁴² Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 83. The universal validity of moral norms can be solved/understood only at a metaphysical level. It has to do with logic and epistemology (Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 64).

⁴³ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 180. "So wie es in Bezug auf unser biologisches Menschsein einige immer gleiche Wesensmerkmale (z.B. die Zugehörigkeit zur Gattung der Lebewesen) gibt, ohne die der Begriff des Menschen nicht gedacht werden kann, so müssen wir auch in der moralischen Ordnung unveränderliche, von der Idee menschlichen Zusammenlebens selbst vorausgesetzte Grundsätze annehmen, die keinerlei Wandel zulassen" (Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*). Cf. also *Ethicorum V*, 12 (Nr. 1028-1029). Cf. also *Veritatis Splendor*, art. 51; Franz Scholz, "Problems on Norms," 163, 173, 175, 178. He calls those relativists who would deny the universality of natural law. The universal norms of natural law are according to the original intention of the law giver, i.e. not to go against reason and justice (Franz Scholz, "Problems on Norms," 166). See also footnotes 23-25 of the same. Joseph Fuchs, "Absoluteness of," in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 1*, 94-137, gives an account of moral norms (natural law) which does not entirely agree to the universality of natural law spoken above. His views are quite different from what he wrote in his *Natural Law* in 1965. Fuchs does not deny outright the universal validity of moral norms but he verges on relativism. On p. 109 he writes absoluteness does not primarily mean universality but that moral behaviour must correspond to personal human reality. Fuchs is giving a meaning of his own to absoluteness. There are other points to consider. On p. 112 he states that one must act responsibly; respect life. On page 116: Act must correspond to being. On page 126: "Every action that is objectively - secundum rectam rationem - not justified in the concrete human situation (according to Schillebeeckx, the sole norm and adequate norm of conduct) is 'intrinsic malum' and therefore absolutely to be avoided." Are these statements/affirmations universally valid or valid only for a particular situation? Is that for which Fuchs is pleading universally valid and absolute?

If things are so situation-bound, one wonders what meaning Christ's words would have for twentyfirst century man. Russel Hittinger, *A Critique of the New Natural Theory*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987, 197-198, doubts the existence of a natural law based on a universal human nature. One could ask R. Hittinger, on what pre-supposition is he writing his book? If there is no universal human nature understood as freedom and rationality and the capacity to perceive truth, including moral truth, who will understand his book? Ralph McInerny, "The Principles," 153, firmly believes that the principles of natural law are absolute and changeless.

human spirit, it belongs to the permanent possession of mankind and is valid everywhere."⁴⁴ Truth once discovered is truth for all and it is independent of historical particularities. It is not dependent on being historically recognized. It transcends historical times and epochs.⁴⁵ According to Max Scheler, as soon as a value is discovered, its validity is for all people of all time. It is so because an essential aspect of reality has been discovered.⁴⁶ E. Troeltsch is of the same view.⁴⁷

Natural Law and Change

Natural law is opposed to historicism which believes that man is an evolving creature and what he is will only be revealed by his history. Historicism does not believe in the existence of an unchanging human nature.⁴⁸ There is a common metaphysical human nature and it is visible only in historical forms. That nature remains essentially same all through history. The moral norms which man discovers also take place in a historical situation. But that fact does not contradict the existence of a common nature nor universal moral laws.⁴⁹

History is an essential dimension of man and his nature. Because of that, that which is permanent in man and his nature can only be observed in historical manifestations.⁵⁰ Man lives in history. He does not become man on account of history. He makes history on account of his nature, on account of his body-soul structure.⁵¹

44 Eberhard Schockenhoff, 139: Es entspricht voll und ganz der Struktur geschichtlicher Wahrheitserkenntnis, daß das überschreiten solcher Schwellen immer nur an einem bestimmten Ort und zu einem durchaus kontingenten Zeitpunkt erfolgen kann. Einmal und irgendwo ins Bewußtsein des menschlichen Geistes getreten, können solche historischen Inventionen zum bleibenden Besitz der Vernunft werden, der fortan immer und überall gelten soll."

⁴⁵ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 93, 137.

⁴⁶ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 71. Cf. Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, 6. Aufl., Bern-München, 276-279. (English trans. of the fifth ed.: *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values : A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, trans. by Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973.)

⁴⁷ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 117. Cf. also E. Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Ueberwindung*, 15.

⁴⁸ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 140. Here Schockenhoff is opposing Dilthey who is a staunch believer in historicism.

⁴⁹ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 142. Schockenhoff is relying on A. Leonard.

⁵⁰ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 51.

⁵¹ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 141.

Nature and history are not opposed to each other. Man is a historical being, i.e. he realizes himself in history as a finite being.⁵² Man's reason is also a historical reality in the sense that it realizes itself in a historical context. It does not live in the realm of the pure spirit.⁵³ History is essential to man and his nature. Thus natural rights, i.e. the idea of a moral criterion of good and evil that transcends all times and ages, must manifest itself in history.⁵⁴ However, the dependence of reason on historical situations does not nullify its capacity to discover truth nor does it mean that a truth discovered in a historical context is valid only for that period.⁵⁵

Evaluating Ethical Relativism

Veritas Splendor was written to explicitly counter relativism. It calls relativism the power of darkness (no. 1).

Kelson posits tolerance as a universal value. There are also other values that are presupposed: Human life is a value. Doing violence is a disvalue. Thus tolerance is not the only value, and tolerance is believed to be an inter-subjective value. It is not relative. It is self-contradictory to believe in ethical relativism and at the same time speak about the value of tolerance, as a value for all.⁵⁶

Cognitive relativism is self-contradictory. If everything is relative, then this affirmation/proposition is itself relative. That is, it is true only in relation to certain other things and in certain context. That implies that there are absolute truths. No right thinking person will fail to see the untenability of cognitive relativism.⁵⁷ According to

⁵² Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 138. Cf. also Joseph Fuchs, "Absoluteness of ", 107-108, 114.

⁵³ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 138, 70.

⁵⁴ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 51.

⁵⁵ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 139.

⁵⁶ Almost in these same words criticizes Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 74, 74, 79 those who propose ethical relativism and at the same time plead for tolerance. Johan de Tavernier is of the view that one must allow the other to have another view, another position. However, if the other's view is unethical, one need not tolerate it (Johan de Tavernier, "Tolerance, Pluralism and Religious Truth," 6).

⁵⁷ Dietrich von Hildebrandt, *Christian Ethics*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1953, 106-109. Ashley Miranda, "From Ethical Relativism to Ethical Pluralism : Insights from Alasdair MacIntyre," in *Pluralism of Pluralism: A Pluralistic Probe into Philosophizing*, ed., Johnson J. Puthenpurackal, Bangalore, Asian Trading Corporation, 2006, 252 writes: "Relative truth is no truth at all." Cf. also Joseph Venattumattam, "Pluralism and Relativism," in *Pluralism of Pluralism: A Pluralistic Probe into Philosophizing*, Johnson Puthenpurackal, ed., Bangalore, Asian Trading Corporation, 2006, 118, where he makes critical remarks about relativism. Johnson J. Puthenpurackal in his article "Pluralism: A Philosophical Clarification of the Notion"

Joseph Venattumattam 'everything is relative' can be understood both relatively and absolutely. If it is understood relatively, then it implies that there are absolutes. And if it is understood absolutely, then it is an example for an absolute statement.⁵⁸ Logical relativism is not maintainable. The laws of thought, judgments for a consciousness (*Bewußtsein*) are independent of time and space.⁵⁹

What G. König writes in his article on "Relativismus" is relativism in its pure form. In this form it is difficult to see how there can ever be an intersubjective truth, i.e. a truth that is also a truth for another consciousness or human being. The perceiving subjects are so different/unique so that they perceive the world also differently. If, on the other hand, there is to be a common truth, a truth to which all human beings can say yes, then there should be something independent of the perceiving subject. Is the common truth due to the fact there is something common in the perceiving subjects or is it due to the fact that there is a world/truth which is identical to all the perceiving subjects or consciousness?

It is only in the presence of the subject that reality shows itself or a subject is needed to perceive reality. But the subject does not create reality to such an extent that reality is what the subject thinks reality is. There ought to be something other than the subject. Otherwise, the subject will be perceiving only itself.

It will be helpful to understand ethical relativism if we clarify the meaning of 'absolute'. Going from the Latin root of the word, 'absolute' means 'detached from' or 'independent of'. Thus an absolute truth is that which is independent of any factor like time, space, the speaker or any other interest.⁶⁰

in *Pluralism of Pluralism: A Pluralistic Probe into Philosophizing*, Johnson J. Puthenpurackal, ed., Bangalore, Asian Trading Corporation, 2006, pleads vehemently for pluralism. Pluralism, if not properly qualified, can easily lead to relativism.

⁵⁸ Cr. Joseph Venattumattam, "Relativismus," 1157. I feel Venattumattam is misunderstanding the statement. 'Everything is relative is a self contradictory statement which leads to its own negation. It cannot be understood both relatively and absolutely. It is proposed as an absolute truth which wants to deny that there are such truths. In its very denial it affirms the opposite of what it denies.

⁵⁹ Cf. G. Koenig, "Relativismus," 614. G. Koenig is quoting R. Eisler, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe und Ausdrücke*, 2. Aufl., Bd. 2, 1904, 251f. Cf. Also, Ashley Miranda, "From Ethical Relativism," 253.

⁶⁰ Cf. Harald Schoendorf, "Ist die Wahrheit intolerant?," in *Stimmen derZeit* 134, Heft 3 (2009) 129.

Ethical relativism is a corollary of cognitive relativism.⁶¹ Cognitive relativism is self-contradictory. So also ethical relativism is self-contradictory. The very statement that ethical truths are relative or are not universally valid is self-contradictory because the statement wants to be understood as a universally valid truth. If it is possible to become aware of cognitive truths, it is also possible to become aware of ethical/moral truths. And if one would deny the possibility of becoming aware of cognitive truths, he will be contradicting himself because the very affirmation of the statement is the proof that it is possible to be aware of truths.

Ethical relativism is self-contradictory.⁶² Bernard Williams calls ethical relativism an absurdity in moral philosophy, and it is a worldview propagated by ethnologists.⁶³ Ethical principles are not relative.⁶⁴ Edmund Husserl consistently argued against both cognitive and ethical relativism. He feels that the relativists draw laws from facts, contingent facts (*zufälligkeit*) (positive sciences) and apply them to logical and necessary principles.⁶⁵ Joseph Venattumattam calls ethical relativism a plague that affects our life by encouraging "homosexuality, pornography, abortion, fornication" and other evils.⁶⁶ In other words, Venattumattam longs for something desirable, and that is desirable for all men. Venattumattam's own observation is not meant to be relative. It is absolute in the sense of being valid for all. Ashley Miranda evaluates the phenomenon of ethical relativism of our day as a philosophy detrimental to human society.⁶⁷

Pope Benedict XVI in his book *Light of the World* is of the view that no one should be extravagant in his claim to possess the truth. However, he writes: "No one will dispute that one must be careful and cautious in claiming the truth. But simply to dismiss it as unattainable is really

⁶¹ Roland H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999, 245, comes to the same conclusion.

⁶² Cf. Arno Anzenbacher, "Relativismus," 1031. Cf. also Otfried Hoeffe, "Relativismus," in *Lexikon der Ethik*, hrsg. Von Otfried Hoeffe in Zusammenarbeit mit M. Forschner, A. Schoepf und W. Vossenkuhl, 3. Neubearbeitete Auflage, Muenchen: C. H. Beck, 1986, 206.

⁶³ Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 55.

⁶⁴ Cf. G. Koenig, "Relativismus," 614. G. Koenig is basing himself on R. Eisler, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe und Ausdrücke*, 3. Aufl., Bd. 2, 1910, 1197f.

⁶⁵ Cf. G. Koenig, "Relativismus," 614, 617.

⁶⁶ Cf. Joseph Venattumattam, "Relativismus," 1155.

⁶⁷ Cf. Ashley Miranda, "From Ethical Relativism," 233-238.

destructive."⁶⁸ Truth is attainable and it is intersubjective or universal by its very nature.

The affirmation that moral values discovered by a particular culture are valid for that culture only is a self-contradiction because the meaning of this very affirmation is meant for all people and not only for the members of the culture in which the affirmation was first expressed. This is true of historical ethical relativism as well.

A moral value, by definition, is a value for all men. Something cannot be true and false at the same time. Accordingly, a value cannot be a value for some people and a disvalue for others. Thus, according to the principle of non-contradiction, radical ethical relativism is not maintainable.⁶⁹

Man must plan himself (*entwerfen*) in history. That presupposes an element in man which is capable of distinguishing between true and false, good and bad. That *Potenz* (faculty) is independent of history.⁷⁰ Man makes progress in his ethical insights. But it is not done by giving up what has been discovered. If one would do it, it would contradict reason.⁷¹

That which gives reason and validity to man's interpretations, etc. is his nature. Man is not reasonable and ethical due to history but due to his nature. Due to man's reason-nature, he creates history.⁷²

Basic values (*Grundwerte*) are discovered in history. But once discovered, they are irreversible, lasting and claim unconditional validity (*Geltung*). The search for (*die Frage nach*) basic values is the search for "the unconditional among the conditional, for the absolute among the relative and for the lasting in the fleeting moments of history".⁷³

⁶⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, "Dictatorship of Relativism" in *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. By Michael J. Miller and Adrian J. Walker, Bangalore: ATC, 2010, 50.

⁶⁹ Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Naturrecht*, 81-82 points to the self-contradictoriness of relativism in a similar way. Cf. also Bartosz Wieckowski, "Relativ?Relativismus," 347-348.

⁷⁰ Cf. Wilhelm Korff, "Normtheorie: Die Verbindlichkeitsstruktur des Sittlichen," in *Handbuch der christlichen Ethik*, Bd. 1, hrsg. von Anselm Hertz, Wilhelm Korff, Trutz Rendtroff, Hermann Ringling, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1978, 148 (114-167).

⁷¹ Cf. Wilhelm Korff, "Normtheorie," 148, 161.

⁷² Cf. Wilhelm Korff, "Normtheorie," 149.

⁷³ Cf. Wilhelm Korff, "Normtheorie," 125.

Postmodernism leads to relativism. Postmodernism has been described as “intellectual nihilism, social scepticism and political cynicism.”⁷⁴

There is an interpretation or understanding of relativism which is less radical and which may be acceptable. According to this form of relativism, the world, truth and reality can be interpreted differently. The world is not a final product. There is truth and falsehood.⁷⁵ The decisive question will be: how will one distinguish between true and false interpretations? Is it so that one interpretation is as good as another?

There is a sense in which ethical norms are seen relatively in the sense of their application being different in different times.⁷⁶ Respect for human life may not always have implied respecting the good name of the person or considering human life as worthy of defence from the moment of conception. There are authors who see a positive element in relativism in the sense of relativism having challenged the false absolutizing of non-absolute values.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Cf. Joseph Memampambil, “Values That Will Save the Human Race,” in *Vidyajyothi* 74, 10 (2010) 738. Roland H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions*, 228-251 evaluates postmodernism in detail. His criticism of postmodernism is very profound and convincing. He calls it intellectual suicide.

⁷⁵ Cf. G. Koenig, “Relativismus,” 618. Karl Acham’s description of relativism in “Einheit-Differenzierung,” 130-153, seems to go this direction. He just describes the tendencies in philosophy of science and moral philosophy towards relativism and universalism without evaluating the tendencies. What Karl Acham says by way of conclusion by quoting Pascal: “we cannot know anything with certainty” is self-contradictory. He concludes his article by quoting social economist Joseph A. Schumpeter: “One must be aware of the limited validity of one’s convictions and still stand by them, and that separates the civilized from the barbarian” (“Sich der bedingten Gueltigkeit der eigenen Überzeugungen bewußt zu sein und dennoch entschlossen für sie einzustehen, unterscheidet den zivilisierten Menschen vom Barbaren” (ibid., 150)). One can ask Karl Acham: Is that which Joseph A. Schumpeter says valid only for the second world war situation or is it valid for all time? In other words, is it relative or is it absolute/universal? Veerle Draulans and Lök Halman, “Mapping Contemporary Europe’s Moral and Religious Pluralistic Landscape : An Analysis Based on the Most Recent European Value Study Data in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 20, 2, 2005, 179-193, also plainly states that there is in Europe pluralistic tendencies with regard to religion and morality, and that plurality is not necessarily related either to financial status, or to denominational affiliation and educational levels and cultural heritage. One could say that pluralistic tendencies in ethics is a kind of uncritical acceptance of relativism in ethics. If one were to critically analyze ethical relativism, one will see the untenability of it (personal).

⁷⁶ Cf. G. Koenig, “Relativismus,” 614. G. Koenig is basing himself on R. Eisler, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe und Ausdrücke*, 3. Aufl., Bd. 2, 1910, 1197f.

⁷⁷ Cf. Ashley Miranda, “From Ethical Relativism”, 255; Joseph Venattumattam, “Pluralism and Relativism,” 119.

Knowledge of individual positive sciences like biology, chemistry, oceanography is relative in the sense what was thought as true once becomes false in the light of new discoveries.⁷⁸ That is not the case with ethical insights. An ethical insight cannot become an error or non-insight later in time.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ claimed: "I am the way, the truth and life" (Jn 14:6). The Church is the continuation of Jesus Christ on earth. Neither the claim of Jesus nor the belief of the Church to be the continuation of Jesus Christ is relative. They are independent of time and space although these claims have been made in time and space. The validity of these claims transcends time and space. These claims are valid for all time.

The moral insights of reason are trans-situational or metasituational. To claim that the claims of moral reason is not universal is itself universal and thus self-contradictory. It is not a maintainable thesis.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Cf. G. Koenig, "Relativismus," 614. G. Koenig is basing himself on R. Eisler, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe und Ausdrücke*, 2.Aufl., Bd. 2, 1904, 251f.

⁷⁹ The author wishes to state explicitly that some of the issues raised in this article are highly controversial and so requires further study and discussion and therefore it is not his intention to be dogmatic about them.