# Critical Review of David Wong, *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xii + 248 pp., $35.00.

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McConnell, Terrance (1986) Critical Review of David Wong's *Moral Relativity* (University of California Press, 1984) in *Nous* 20(4) (November 1986), pp. 559-562.



**Article:**

This book defends "a theory built around the claim that there is no single true morality" (p. 1). To clarify what he is arguing for, Wong sets out six theses associated with the debate about objectivity and subjectivity in morality (p. 1): (1) "Moral statements have truth values;" (2) "There are good and bad arguments for the moral positions people take;" (3) "Nonmoral facts (states of affairs that obtain in the world and that can be described without the use of moral terms such as `ought,' `good,' and `right') are relevant to the assessment of the truth value of moral statements;" (4) "There are moral facts . . .;" (5) "When two moral statements conflict as recommendations to action, only one statement can be true;" (6) "There is a single true morality." Wong claims (pp. 2-3) that there are features of moral experience which suggest that at least some of theses (1)-(6) are true, and these point to moral objectivity. But there are other features of moral experience—for example, "deep disagreement" over moral issues and "significant diversity in moral belief —which suggest subjectivity (pp. 3-4).

Wong calls those who affirm all of (1)-(6) "absolutists" (p. 3). "Relativists," by contrast, deny (6), and often (5) and (4) as well (p. 4). The principal argument of this book is "that a certain kind of relativist theory provides a maximal reconciliation of the features of experience suggesting objectivity with the features suggesting subjectivity" (p. 5). Wong's main defense of moral relativity, then, is a "best explanation" argument.

Wong discusses relativistic analyses of moral language which he believes are inadequate, beginning with the work of Stevenson and Hare (Chapter 2). Each of these views fails because neither takes the notion of moral truth seriously; thus they fail to capture the cognitive content of moral statements. Because of this common shortcoming, Wong suggests that a new framework is needed, one constructed from the work of Tarski and Davidson on truth. By focusing on the conditions under which moral statements are true, we can state the issue between absolutists and relativists in a different way: absolutists hold that the truth conditions of moral statements are the same across different societies, while relativists hold that truth conditions vary (p. 17). We can get clearer on the nature of moral truth by showing how 'ought' and 'good' contribute to the truth conditions of statements like "A ought to do X" and "X is a good Y" (p. 19). Completion of this project requires a principle for translating the truth conditions of a group's language, and Wong attempts to provide this (Chapter 8).

Wong regards morality as a social creation, and (in Chapter 3) he discusses two relativistic analyses—those of Harman and Castenada-compatible with this idea. Though these analyses are regarded as significant improvements over their predecessors, they too are found to be wanting. Wong maintains that moral rules are created to resolve internal and interpersonal conflicts (p. 38), and his own analysis of "A ought to do X" statements is as follows: "By not doing X under actual conditions C, A will be breaking a rule of an adequate moral system applying to him or her" (p. 40). An adequate moral system is one that meets the standard or ideals for moral systems. This analysis implies "that a number of moral systems may be equally adequate from the standpoint of an ideal morality" (p. 44). The idea here is that one extension of 'adequate moral system' may

contain a number of conflicting moral systems. This allows for one kind of moral relativity, namely, one that involves the denial of claim (5). Even some absolutists can accept this, though (as Wong is aware), because it simply suggests that an ideal of morality may be flexible enough to allow for different applications to different societies under different circumstances.

In completing the analysis of "A ought to do X" statements (Chapter 5), Wong utilizes descriptive and causal theories of reference to explain how the reference of 'adequate moral system' is determined. In spelling this out, he tries to show how this account accommodates objective features of moral experience—for example, how moral error is possible (pp. 54, 58, 62)—while avoiding the defects of previous relativistic analyses (pp. 63-66). It is here that Wong discusses a more radical form of moral relativity, namely, that the extension of 'adequate moral system' can vary over different groups (p. 65). Different extensions correspond to different ideals of morality. Thus conflicting systems from different extensions may be applied to the same set of circumstances of a society. This gets at the heart of the dispute between absolutists and relativists because if this is correct, then claim (6) is false, and that absolutists cannot accept. At this point in Wong's argument, though, this type of moral relativity is introduced only as a possibility.

A general analysis of "X is a good Y" statements is also defended (Chapter 6). The analysis is, "Under actual conditions C, X satisfies the appropriate standard for Y's" (p. 70). Wong explains how this and his analysis of ought-statements constitute a rejection of the view that moral reality is independent of human choice and invention (p. 72). This does not mean, however, that moral systems are not subject to rational criticism. Moral systems are based on factual assumptions, some of which may be shown to be false (pp. 73-74), and in practice the content of moral systems is limited by their function, to resolve conflicts (p. 74).

Absolutist views imply that there is a single true morality, and if any of them is correct then Wong's analysis must be rejected. Thus (in Chapter 7) absolutist analyses are explained and criticized, including the Kantian analyses of Gewirth, Nagel, and Donagan, the Aristotelianism of McDowell and Foot, and the Platonism of Moore and Platts.

Diversity and disagreement in moral belief are widespread and striking, and Wong believes that relativism provides the best explanation of these phenomena. He is aware that absolutists have ways of trying to explain diversity and disagreement (see pp. 117-119 plus the subsequent three chapters), but in the end he argues that their explanations are inadequate. In Chapter 9 Wong discusses virtue-centered and rights-centered moralities. The former is characterized as "concerned with a good common to all members of a community," where the common good is constituted in part by a shared life. The latter emphasizes "what each member of the community is entitled to claim from other members," typically including rights to freedom, property, and well-being (p. 121). A critical examination of MacIntyre's claim that only principles of virtue-centered moralities can be objective provides the setting for this discussion. In Chapter 10 Wong argues that there is relativity *within* both virtue-centered and rights-centered moralities. It is claimed that within a moral tradition there may be agreement on standards, but in some areas of conduct it is unclear which rules satisfy the standard. Wong argues that this indeterminacy in extension plagues both virtue-centered and rights-centered moralities. The principal claim of Chapter 11 is that there is relativity *across* virtue-centered and rights-centered moralities. In part, this is because what constitutes human fulfillment varies with different groups, and so we get different extensions for 'adequate moral system' among different groups. It is at this point, after having set out a principle of translation (Chapter 8) and after having examined some actual cases of variation in moral belief across societies, that Wong's argument for the radical form of moral relativity is complete. If this part of the argument is correct, not only is claim (5) of the absolutist false, but so too is claim (6).

Chapters 12 and 13 address the alleged normative implications of relativism. In the former of these chapters Wong argues from moral relativism to the conclusion that one ought to be tolerant of those who practice a different morality "that is as true as one's own" (p. 177). To derive this conclusion from moral relativism requires additional ethical premises (p. 180), but Wong contends that, these are premises that Kantians and utilitarians will accept. In the latter chapter Wong argues that the recognition of moral relativity can contribute

positively to bringing about a society in which the equal worth of each person is affirmed. He utilizes the Chinese philosophy of Taoism to support this claim. The claims in these two chapters are quite controversial, as Wong is aware, and I suspect that many will be unconvinced. Among other things, one wonders if moral statements will retain their same "push" with those who accept the truth of moral relativism. In part this is to worry that relativists will fall into nihilism, and in part to wonder whether an *individual's* choice of morality will be constrained in the same way that a *group's* is. Wong addresses both issues (pp. 207-208 and 75-76), but a more thorough discussion would have been helpful.

Restrictions of space have forced me to focus on only some of Wong's conclusions and to ignore arguments. But there are arguments and they are well worth investigating. This book is clearly written and well organized; one of its novel features is the way that it utilizes the tools of philosophy of language to develop a metaethical theory. And though the views of many philosophers are discussed, the treatment of them is neither superficial nor just a summary of the extant literature. I recommend this book both to relativists and to opponents of relativism. I hope that it receives the wide audience that it deserves.[1]

[1] In writing this review I have benefited from correspondence with David Wong.