

Globalization versus Relativism: The Imperative of a Universal Ethics

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Abstract

The place and role of relativism in the history of philosophy is replete in diverse literatures. In the domain of values, relativism had been exalted beyond bounds. However, in view of the emergence of globalization and its unifying influence and impact, as well as recent global challenges to human life and security, the paper maintains that a wholesome acceptance of relativism in the domain of values has obvious unpalatable consequences. The paper argues finally that a universal ethics is not a possibility today, but an imperative.

Keywords: globalization, relativism, imperative, universal, ethics

1. Introduction

The world is experiencing an increased level of interconnectedness manifesting in political, economic and cultural integration or alignments. There seems to be a gradual but steady transformation from simple value system to a more complex system. Globalization is one significant factor that has contributed immensely to these changes in the hitherto world value status quo.

Globalization seems to have questioned the frontiers of relativism which recommends guarding jealously the values of cultural identity, uniqueness and distinctiveness. This paper aspires to examine some implications of globalization and relativism and to seek some rational grounds for them. It aspires also to discover as a matter of fact if one culture can be shield from the influences of other cultures, and whether cultural relativism must be upheld at all cost. Finally, it provides the rational basis and argues for the imperative of a universal ethics for the articulation, and resolution of moral, social and political issues or problems. Let us explore the meaning of the concepts involve in this discussion namely, globalization and relativism.

2. Understanding Globalization and Relativism

Globalization as a revolutionary phenomenon in world history has been total and non-selective in its impact. Its impact has been multifaceted and best characterize as a ravaging force on the social, political, cultural and economic spheres of the world.

Globalization is a complex process of transformation and re-direction of world history and progress in a forceful and multi-dimensional way. It is a process whose end, predictions at the moment may be far from accurate. What however, cannot be denied is the fact that the effects whether negative or positive are universally undeniable. In view of the complexity of the processes called globalization, there should be no intellectual depression whatsoever as to the absence of a univocal definition. Asobie (2001) acknowledges this fact when he maintains that:

Globalization is a contested concept. Its meaning is in contention. Its character is a point in dispute. Its history is mired in controversy. And although its ideological implications are relatively free of serious contestation, its implications for ... the international system constitutes a moot point.

To expect a univocal definition therefore, with respect to such contestable a concept and process as globalization, in view of the multi-disciplinary interest in the phenomenon, is nothing more than having a pious hope.

In view of this fact, we shall aspire only to present some working definitions and make general remarks about the concept or phenomenon. According to Scholte (1977):

Globalization refers to processes whereby social relations acquire relatively distance-less and borderless qualities, so that human lives are increasingly played out in the world as a single place. Social relations – that is, the countless and complex ways that people interact with and affect each other – are more and more being conducted and organized on the basis of a planetary unit. By the same token country locations, and in particular the boundaries between territorial states, are in some important senses becoming less central to our lives, although they do remain significant. Globalization is thus an on-going trend whereby the world has-in many respects and at a generally accelerating rate become one relatively borderless social sphere.

The above definition of globalization reveals that its impact fundamentally, covers social relations in the family, state and society at large. From an economic perspective, the globalization project seeks to stabilize capitalism through global economic management, this time, along the lines of specialization rather than replication. And according to Alapike (2005) in a more detailed manner views globalization from the economic stand point as referring to:

The increased integration, across countries, of markets for goods, services and capital. It implies in turn accelerated expansion of economic activities globally and sharp increases in the movement of tangible and intangible goods across national and regional boundaries. With that movement, individual countries are becoming more closely integrated into the global economy. Their trade linkages and investment flows grow more complex and cross-border financial movements are more volatile. More importantly, globalization has been created, and continues to be maintained by liberalization of economic policies in several key areas.

Hence, from a purely economic perspective, globalization centres on the expansion of the frontiers of commerce, through technological advancement and liberalized economic policies. It refers to the systematic integration of national economies into a global economy. This perhaps informs the definition that globalization represents the trump of a capitalist world economy tied together by a global division of labour. In the same vein Spich (1995) views globalization as:

a conceptualization of the international political economy which suggests and believes essentially that all economic activity whether local, regional, or national, must be conducted within a perspective and attitude that constantly is global and worldwide in scope.

While for Steingard and Fitzgibbons (1999) it is:

An ideological construct devised to satisfy capitalism's need for new markets and labour sources and propelled by the uncritical sycophancy of the international academic business community (Steingard & Fitzgibbons 1999).

So apart from a purely economic understanding, globalization is also a social or ideological weapon, hence Harvey's definition of globalization as "... a spatial fix for capitalism and an ideological tool with which to attack socialists" (1999).

It is instructive to note that some scholars have viewed globalization from a more comprehensive standpoint and not strictly from an economic perspective. In this respect, Holm and Sorensen (1995) defines globalization as "... the intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across borders". And for Featherstone (1995):

The process of globalization suggests simultaneously two images of culture. The first image entails the extension outwards of a particular culture to its limit, the globe. Heterogeneous cultures become incorporated and integrated into a dominant culture which eventually covers the whole world. The second image points to the compression of cultures. Things formerly held apart are now brought into contact and juxtaposition.

Following this line of thought Jameson (1998) argues that:

As a cultural process, globalization names the explosion of a plurality of mutually intersecting, individually syncretic, local differences, the emergence of new, hitherto suppressed identities, and the expansion of a world-wide media and technology culture with the promise of popular democratization.

This attempt at merging or uniting several elements as it were into some kind of an inseparable bond is perhaps what Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton (1999) refer to in their definition of globalization as:

The widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual.

From our discussion above we can view globalization as a complex social processes that involves redefining the hitherto existing world relations in a manner that impact upon the world one way or the other almost simultaneously, and resulting in new sets or patterns of relationships, goals, values with an unprecedented unifying force, synthesizing as it were and also anti-synthesizing commerce, cultures, politics, communication as well as other hitherto private aspects of personal and interpersonal affairs. Its influence is pervasive as it is a threat and persuasive as it is attractive. Hence we may agree with Alapiki (2005) that:

When seen from the point of view of worldwide process of change, globalization could refer to all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society or global society.

In fact Thomas Friedman's (2004) short definition of globalization as "the integration of everything with everything else" is therefore apt, so much for globalization. On the other hand relativism generally conceived, is the view that the appropriate standpoint from which humans can understand, assess or evaluate beliefs and behaviours is in terms of historical and cultural context. Philosophical or moral or ethical and cultural relativism are two major variants of relativism. Ethical relativism is the view that there are diversities of moral practices; hence no single universal moral standard exists. In other words, there is no single universally applicable and valid moral standard for all cultures. It follows from this that judging the actions or conducts of any person of a different moral community on the basis of one's own moral values is morally unacceptable.

Cultural relativism on the other hand is the view that different cultures have different moral standards which regulate human actions and these actions are or should be assessed or evaluated by these standards. Hence cultural relativism is descriptive and prescriptive in nature. It purports to explain what obtains as it were and at the same time suggestive of a principle of evaluation. Another way of making the same point is that cultural relativism is the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the cultural beliefs of a people to which the agent is a member. To determine what is objectively true and right we need only to appeal to the agent's cultural beliefs.

Hence relativism whatever its kind appeals to the beliefs, standards and cultural practices of a people as the ultimate source of its morality. This understanding is recommended whenever the term relativism is used in this essay. Conceptual issues settled, we need to attend to the crucial issues that this essay aspires to discuss.

3. Globalization versus Relativism: The Issues

One remarkable achievement of globalization is the reduction of the hitherto disparately existing nationalities to a single globalized village. In addition trade is made easier and communication have challenged and broken down the "walls" which stood as barriers to a united world. There is also the emergence of a transitional policy as well as a cosmopolitan culture. Finally, there has been a creation of new world politics where danger to one state is seen as danger to the world as a whole. This trend has birth forth unprecedented social values that have threatened to eliminate the beauty, destroying the collective freewill, rights, traditions and values of other cultures. Hence, by destroying the collective freewill of other cultures, it destroys their autonomy. It is this perceived effect of globalization above anything else that cultural relativism seems opposed to. Globalization is seen as more or less an expression of Western hegemony and cultural imperialism. Sectarian and nationalistic philosophical ideologies conceived as check have held sway. A defense of cultural relativism at all cost is seen as the most potent weapon against such an imperialist disposition disguised in a frail economy. Globalization and relativism thus appear anti-thetical in focus. While, globalization seeks to assimilate cultures, relativism insists on the disparate commitments of cultures and the defense of specific cultural identities and uniqueness. Globalization is thus a threat.

The relativist's position is anchored on several arguments which include fundamentally the following:

- (1) Argument from cultural diversity – the fact that different cultures have different moral practices.
- (2) Argument from the fact of moral disagreements. A moral disagreement implies the absence of a consensus or universally valid standard for the resolution of moral problems.
- (3) That ethical convergence on moral truth and standards does not exist as is found in natural laws of the natural or physical sciences.
- (4) That belonging to different ideological camps, persuasions or nationalities is in itself a sufficient proof of the importance of relativism.

Hence, the relativist argument may best be summarized in the words of Sir Isaiah Berlin (1999) that “Life may be seen through many windows, none of them necessarily clear or opaque, less or more distorting than any of the others”.

As it relates to globalization therefore, relativism tend to be making two points namely; that globalization threatens the flourishing of unique and distinct cultures and must be checked if it can't be stopped, and that valid universal moral principles does not exist as different people and cultures have different values, beliefs and truths, each of which may be regarded as valid.

The above implication raises some crucial concerns. If relative standards are all there is and by extension could possibly be, why bother about the effects of globalization? And does it imply that valid universal principles may never ever be discovered, or will be of no use if eventually found? These and related issues deserve our attention presently. We need however, to make some preliminary observations about the claims of relativism. Firstly, the absence of a universal and valid moral standard does not itself eliminate the need for such a search and globalization may be one of such route to the discovery.

Secondly, differences in standards or values may be superficial and does not entail that if two cultures have contradictory moral standards that both must be true as relativism presupposes. Thirdly, that there are no ethical convergence on moral standards as in the natural sciences is not a sufficient proof that it never will be, or it may well be that strict convergence may be uncalled for as pluralistic valid principles may be a necessity in morality but not in science.

Fourthly, the relativist position is that moral rules are relative but this does not mean or prove that those relative rules are indeed the right ones that must be followed or that non-relativist theories are impossible. Fifthly, if an agents cultural beliefs do contain moral distortions and perversions as part of the belief, then relativism extremely conceived provides no standards at all, but encourages some sort of moral skepticism. What is obvious from the points noted above is that whatever the merits of relativism, it is inconclusive as reasons for outlawing universal values or the need for such a search.

On a serious note and as a matter of fact, in a globalized world cultural differences cannot be completely wiped off but such differences may manifest in pluralistic standards. This is because there is no conception of a good life appropriate to a person outside “the good” itself. The “rational life plan of persons” to use Rawls' phraseology must be within the limits of what is available to persons as “goods”, and the more extensive these are, the better for the flourishing of human life at whatsoever conceivable sphere. It follows from the above therefore, that globalization should not be viewed simply as providing an opportunity to break new economic and political grounds hitherto alien to disparate cultures or nations, but most importantly, must be seen to provide the grounds and the means of rethinking our value preferences. It is on this premise that it becomes crucial that we do not only examine in greater detail the implications of moral and cultural relativism but stress the need for a universal ethics.

4. The Implication of Relativism: A Re-examination

Firstly, one of the canons of relativism as indicated above is the existence of moral disagreements among persons and cultures. The fact of disagreement is incontestable in virtually every sphere of human activity either in a minor or substantive form. The point, however is, that people have disagreement over an issue does not imply the absence of an objective truth or a better and more accurate explanation on the issue; nor does it foreclosed the possibility of finding one sooner or later. For example that two persons disagree on whether the Hausa/Fulani tribes of northern Nigeria are more friendly or respectful than their Igbo brothers of the eastern region does not imply that the truth on this issue is indeterminate.

Besides, the over emphasis on differences as relativism promotes gives an erroneous impression and present all moral problems as insoluble and ultimately permanent in nature. This perception contradicts our everyday experiences in a significant way. Disagreements and reconciliations or agreements are conceptual couples of our very existence. Furthermore relativistic truth has the consequence of destroying the distinction between truth and belief, culminating in the impossibility of anyone believing oneself to be or to have ever been in error. This situation portrays knowledge acquisition in all ramifications in a preposterous light and re-enforces the dilemma of extreme skepticism.

Secondly, anthropological evidences that cultures are different are also presented as some of the strongest support for cultural relativism and so far moral relativism as well. But anthropological findings parading themselves as empirical facts are both inadequate and inconclusive grounds for ascertaining the nature of values. The is/ought dichotomy prevents a scientific model for a scientific proof transforming to a moral principle.

Furthermore, we cannot eliminate the influence of ideological leanings and persuasions in such findings, and ideological presuppositions have diversionary potentials which sometimes obstruct the vision of the real for the imaginary.

Also, as it were, moral relativism will either approve or reject reforms even of obnoxious beliefs and practices. But whichever way, there is a 'relativist dilemma' which to my mind challenges the very foundation of moral relativism. If it approves, then reforms into what one would ask? And if it rejects same, it becomes morally irrelevant and of no moral consequences. Hence, insistence on relativism at all cost is acceptance of some form of moral stagnation, but as a matter of fact there has never been a static culture in history pre or post globalization. In fact culture is socially generated and socially transmitted. It is learned. Viewed from this perspective relativism in any form or guise is dogmatic and close minded?

Relativism also has a queer logical content in the sense of promoting what it claims does not exist and ultimately desiring to be accorded the status of an objective truth it denies, hence "self-referentially inconsistent". As a matter of fact cultures could have different practices yet share the same moral value and a relativism which denies this portrays itself in a very unserious light. It is on this premise that a de-relativistic or universal ethics is considered plausible and possible.

5. A Proposal for a Universal Ethics

While I see nothing wrong in the defense of cultural bound values especially when they are indeed valuable in an intrinsic and comparable way on balance, it is not in itself a justification that some form of harmonization of values, ideals, and principles are impossible or can never be worthwhile. In fact mutually re-enforcing values could be the best in cultures where value resistance and toleration are in their infancy. And if we grant to the relativist that cultural tolerance as a principle is the core of its philosophy, then the relativist should be magnanimous enough to grant that "moral tolerance" is at least a principle with a universal appeal or application.

The relativist must concede that some values like "intolerance", "violence", and "deceit" will destroy a society irrespective of which society they are found. Moral tolerance in itself presupposes a belief in the existence or possibility of that which is true or right and the probability of coming to terms with this reality with time. Hence, the dogmatism that holds that there is no truth closes its mind to the possibility of discerning truth where it does exist.

Perhaps, we need to ask ourselves if there are no distinctive human values transcending cultural bounds. Are there no such things as moral progress, moral reformation or transformation? If not, why is human slavery not applauded globally today? What informs moral progress if not that there is a higher moral order or principle to which obedience is considered morally necessary, compelling or more humane?

In fact is it reasonable for all moral values, principles or actions to be assigned equal moral weight? It is obvious that the moral climate promoted by any act or by the application of a moral principle can either be conducive or offensive and it will be morally unreasonable for the effects to be assigned equal worth as moral relativism recommends. To assign equal moral weight to an incidence of genocide on one hand and an instance of hospitality on the other hand, will entail the denial that harming others even when they are innocent is wrong in any absolute sense.

To be consistent therefore as moral relativism aspires to, it must approve of all practices in specific cultures without exception and if such is the case, then moral relativism is nothing more than a synonym for belief and practices that one considers convenient. More so, moral relativism promotes the view that moral systems are self-contained, totally isolated and absolutely at variance with one another. The truth however, is that no such systems of morality can be found in human society except our contrast is between completely moral and amoral systems, (the existence of the later still will be a subject of dispute). Hence, when there is a consistent and prevalent moral value across some cultures, nothing should forbid us (not even relativism) from making a general rule about such. As a matter of fact in complex societies with diverse standards, which of the sub sets will a relativist recommended and why should he if every differing view and moral rule is right and objective in a way. The implication of our discussions is that moral relativism cannot mean that whatever I believe is my business, for there will be no reason telling others what I believe-harmonization of moral beliefs therefore, must be a possibility even for the relativist. Relativism cannot also mean that some beliefs are not better than others-for this will involve relativism in a moral fraud of seeking to preserve for itself the principles it seeks to deny others.

Relativism in morals as I see it restricts and in a way outlaw the need to seek and discover the true nature of value, and as such tramples moral progress. Thus, despite the claims of relativism to the contrary, a universal

frame work is morally conceivable and to think otherwise at this age is the most fatal delusion of all times. We could start by investigating or assessing moral attitudes and sensibilities. Initially, this will result in a set of pluralistic framework or principles. Gradually and steadily through harmonization and justification an ethical consensus list may emerge with time, and such could be grounded on what seems generally acceptable, good and right under generally tolerable conditions. This idea is not morally strange, for such idea of universalization have always been the bedrock for the critique of practices and cultures regarded as deviant. Why was apartheid in South Africa condemned and destroyed or why was human slavery outlawed? Responses to these questions may be varied, but fundamentally, it will be absurd to deny that these actions were not perceived to violate one or more of these principles: respect for persons, human dignity, human life, social justice and equality universally viewed. Therefore, a universal moral consensus is possible through reason and dialogue.

6. Conclusions

Today, through globalization the world has gradually but steadily become a global village. Threats in one continent or country of the world affect other nations and continents almost immediately. Famine, health threats and the increasing menace of global decline in morals are in themselves a call for humanity to wake up and seek a global resolution of these challenges. In the same vein, wars, suicide attacks and similar security threats to lives and properties are in themselves a clarion call for mankind to tackle together these problems that are occasioned by a negatively relativistic judgmental disposition or perception of values and reality.

Furthermore, contemporary social and political reality manifests to a considerable extent and beyond reasonable doubt other problems and challenges that defiles localization and cultural bonds. Today's world is characterized by a growing desire at meeting global or universal targets whether in health, education, communication, peace, and agriculture to mention but a few. National and regional norms or rules dealing or regulating these concerns are fast becoming anachronistic.

These universal or global targets may be unrealizable without a conscious, radical but positive review of the norms or values of social cooperation. At the same time this new relationship of a global or universal order is breeding new sources of problems. For instance while there are several national regulations on the media (relating to freedom and right to the use of information), the extension of such regulations beyond national boundaries brings to fore the issues of interest, distrust and other concerns which impacts directly or indirectly on global peace and safety.

Similarly, a moral and legal dilemma exist between attempts by international agencies to rescue nations in precarious social situation (capable of jeopardizing these global goals or targets) and the interpretation of such actions as self-seeking and a flagrant abuse of a state's sovereignty. Such problems especially those with moral undertones have persisted and heightened globally in spite of the existence of sets of separate norms or rules for their resolution. Again take another example in health care, and with particular reference to the HIV scourge. There are discrete sets of rules but the need for harmonization and universalization of these rules in terms of a vulnerability framework, dealing with stigmatization and discrimination is long overdue.

The point is that the globalization of hitherto existing local and cultural nationalities have inevitably alter the norms of social relationships as it effects virtually all aspects of life whether or not we accept this fact. If it is accepted that for obvious reasons (social benefits and mutual success), opting out of the global environment or the potential impact of a universal/global order is at least unreasonable if not impossible, then there is the dire need for new terms of engagement or cooperation, not just for meeting global targets or resolving global challenges, but more importantly, for sustaining the achievements.

In addition, even with the global interest in place, priorities may differ. For example some non-western nations could view their most important need as food sufficiency and hence see no need to place, say education, on the same scale as the West. The possibility of prioritization requires universal rules of engagement and cooperation for the stability and progress required in a global world order.

Hence, the imperative of a universal ethics is beyond doubt. Such an ethics will help strengthened the almost moribund human rights culture in most states, enhance the re-articulation of a more inclusive view of human dignity, and inculcate and restore the inestimable values of respect for human life, global peace and tolerance. These ideals it seems shall continue to lie outside the confines of even the most enlightened ethical or moral relativism, in view of our contemporary social reality.

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