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PH201 Philosophical Ethics
Paper 1: Relativism

One of the most prevalent ethical frameworks in American discourse is pure relativism. Unfortunately, even though it is a commonly asserted position, it must be realized that it is not even a valid theory of ethics, much less a sustainable approach to legislation and morality within a society. Proponents of open and legal prostitution often base their arguments on relativism in asserting their desire to see the legal restrictions on prostitution removed. The essential arguments in favor of legal prostitution can be simplified to two points: No one is hurt by the free exchange of money for services by two adults and the state or other individuals do not have the right to assert right and wrong over adults who are not hurting anyone not involved in the transaction since the participants in the transaction do not accept that their actions are morally wrong. The former of these two assertions better fits a discussion of the assertion from Utilitarianism, but the latter is simply an assertion that, since the only direct participants reject the moral state of the action, its moral rightness is what they say it is. This discussion will focus on the latter.

The theory of relativism in the ethical sphere can be stated simply that no objective ethical truth exists. Since no external and objective ethical truth exists, each person or society is free to define right and wrong in the way that best fits his, her, or its own desire. As previously stated, this is clear and apparent in the example offered above in which proponents of legalized prostitution assert that, since they

do not consider the exchange of money for services to be immoral, then it is not immoral and outside the authority of any state or person to say otherwise.

There are two significant flaws in this approach to reasoning in ethics: the fact that it is self-defeating as a definition and the contradiction with human experience. First of all, it must be noted and understood that relativism, as a theory for the approach of ethics, is self-defeating. It would be necessary to reject the idea of discussing ethics at all rather than posit relativism as a valid theory for the science. To explain, if ethics, as a science, is defined as the search for the definition of The Good and relativism asserts that there is no objective definition to be identified for The Good, then relativism, through its first premise, rejects the very science it purports to resolve. Granted, one could, if he were convinced enough in the validity and truth of relativism, reject the possibility of a science of ethics in favor of relativism, and many in the modern world have, at least superficially, done so.

Second, it must be noted that relativism is no, even by its believers, truly adopted in all aspects of ethical or moral life. This is likely because it contradicts the very nature of human experience. As rational beings, we are aware of some concept of right and wrong, and we tend to assert that even before we are conscious of doing so. Even small children have a sense of right and wrong that is often voiced as “fair” or “not fair.” Beyond this, even a person who asserts his right to define right and wrong in some specific instance will expect some protection from society at large if he is the victim of some other member of the society. For example, if a person, while engaging in the perfectly right act of engaging a prostitute returns to his car to find it stolen, he will immediately contact law enforcement and expect some penalties for

the person who stole it. If the position of moral and ethical relativism were fully embraced to its logical end, no penalty would be appropriate or possible since the act of stealing the car is no more or less wrong than the act of engaging the prostitute.

Finally, while it is not a proof, except perhaps a fairly weak dialectical proof, to point out the end point of a theory of ethics or, as it were, anti-ethics, it seems necessary to note that the only possible end point of any system in which moral relativism is carried to its logical conclusion is simply anarchy. No person's life or property would be safe, nor would any person be able to act as he sees fit from fear of reprisal without limit from other members of society. A society that embraces relativism as its approach to answering ethical questions is purely arbitrary and would be incapable of surviving any length.

Relativism, although it is proposed frequently in society today is incapable of providing a workable definition of The Good or even a system by which society can be ordered rejecting any idea of The Good. The example given, open and legal prostitution, rests, not on an assertion of right and wrong, but rather, under the surface, on an assertion of greed and selfishness taking priority over any idea of right and wrong. It ignores or openly rejects human dignity and the likelihood that either or both participants in this free exchange are not free, which is often the case because of societal or personal addictive forces. Beyond that, even proponents of the theory seem to mean not that there is no objective right and wrong, but rather that a person's own desires should outweigh any objective sense of them. Even then, those should extend only until it is inconvenient for the person making the assertion.