Prompt 1

In this essay I aim to describe Cultural Relativism and the Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism and how they affect the Moral Realist’s argument.

Cultural Relativism proclaims that all acts are permissible if it is customary to one’s culture. For example, in “The Elements of Moral Philosophy” by Ruth Benedict, Benedict gives us this scenario: “... the Callatians (a tribe of Indians) customarily ate the bodies of their dead fathers. The Greeks, of course, did not do that- the Greeks practiced cremation… (Benedict, 12).” To the Greeks, eating your dead father was a horrible act, however, to the Callatians, burning their dead fathers was just as equally horrible. These kinds of situations are where the Cultural Relativists’ form their argument. “Different societies have different moral codes. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal code better than another (Benedict, 14).”

The Evolutionary Debunker has an entirely different approach. In the “Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism” article, Katia Vavova explained it as this: “... evolution has pushed our moral beliefs in directions having nothing to do with attitude independent moral truths (Vavova, 104).” As evolution progressed, so did the focus. The original focus was survival, now the focus is morality. “The worry is that if evolution shaped our moral beliefs, but evolution aims for survival and fitness, not moral truth, then the moral skepticism follows (Vavova, 104).”
Although this is a component to the Evolutionary Dubunkers’ argument, Vavova decides to focus on the argument itself. She says that the dubunker’s argument needs to be empirical, targeted, and epistemological. Empirical, in the fact that the argument rests on a claim about our beliefs origin. The argument must also be targeted. This means it should only threaten the moral realists’ moral beliefs. Lastly, the argument should be epistemological. This means the conclusion isn’t that there are no moral truths, just that it would be impossible to know them because of evolution.

Both the Cultural Relativist and the Evolutionary Debunking have some fairly good points. However, the Cultural Relativist has a more challenging argument to the Moral Realist. This is because the Evolutionary Debunker only wishes to prove that if there are universal moral truths, there is no way to know them because of how much our world has changed in evolution. And if you don’t know what something is, there is no way to disprove it.

The Cultural Relativist however, seeks to prove that there are no true universal moral facts because everything is relative to one’s culture. As our society progresses, I would say it tends to favor this. For example: Islamic culture tends to have a sexist view towards women and their rights, but our society tells us that that is just their culture so we need to respect it. A moral realist would say that this is wrong because we all deserve equal rights. A cultural relativist would say that it is their culture, so it is right for them.

The moral realist does have a rebuttal to this, however. Cultural tolerance is a great thing, but it can be taken too far. To prove that there does seem to be universal truths, the moral realist should bring up an examples where tolerance wasn’t the answer. An example would be World War 2. Germany was genocidal towards the jews. America, and other parts of the world, saw this
as morally wrong. We even went to war over it. If we had taken the Cultural Relativist approach, we would’ve left Germany alone and said it was just part of their culture to torture Jews. To a moral realist, this shows that there are some things that are to be universal truths (anti-genocide being one), and it would be very difficult for a cultural relativist to dispute.