

The absolute truth about relativism

I don't write very often about relativism. Part of the reason is that few if any of the critics I find myself engaging with -- for example, fellow analytic philosophers of a secular or progressive bent, or scientifically inclined atheists -- take relativism any more seriously than I do. It just doesn't come up. Part of the reason is that many other people have more or less already said what needs to be said about the subject. It's been done to death.

It is also possible to overstate the prevalence of relativism outside the ranks of natural scientists, analytic philosophers, theists, and other self-consciously non-relativist thinkers.

As Michael Lynch notes in his book *True to Life: Why Truth Matters*, remarks that can superficially seem to be expressions of relativism might, on more careful consideration, turn out to have a different significance. For example, when, during a conversation on some controversial subject, someone says something like "Well, it's a matter of opinion" or "Who's to say?", this may not be intended to imply that there is no objective fact of the matter about which view is correct. The person may instead have simply decided that the discussion has reached an uncomfortable impasse and would like to change the subject.

On the other hand, many people seem not to understand the difference between the claim that *there is no agreement about such-and-such* and the claim that *there is no objective truth of the matter about such-and-such*. Hence even many people who are primarily concerned to assert the first proposition rather than the second may nevertheless affirm the second one too if pressed. And in that case they are at least *implicitly* relativists. Thus, while Lynch is right that there are probably fewer self-conscious relativists than meets the eye, that is not necessarily because the people in question are all self-consciously *non*-relativist. Many people just have confused or inchoate ideas about these things.

Moreover, outside of analytic philosophy and natural science, there are many academics who do express relativist views of some variety or other. And of course, students often evince relativist attitudes. (Every philosophy professor is familiar with the notorious "freshman relativist," whom Simon Blackburn once characterized as "a nightmare figure of introductory classes in ethics.") So the subject is worth addressing now and then. And since I get asked about it myself from time to time, I thought I'd write up a post summarizing the main problems with relativism.

Truth and relativism

What is relativism, anyway? The best way to approach that question is by asking first what *truth* is. A lot of ink has been spilled on that question, but the traditional notion -- the commonsense notion and the notion one finds in philosophers like Aristotle and Aquinas -- is that truth is a matter of *conformity* or *correspondence* between thought and reality (and, by extension, between language and reality, since we express our thoughts in language). You have the thought that *the cat is on the mat*, and perhaps you go on to express this thought by uttering the sentence "The cat is on the mat." If the cat really is on the mat, then your thought is true, and so is the sentence by which you expressed it, because in that case the thought and the sentence conform or correspond to the way things really are. And if the cat is not really on the mat, then your thought and utterance are false, because they fail to conform or correspond to reality.

There is nothing especially fancy or sophisticated about this. In particular, there is nothing in it that entails a commitment to some high falutin' "theory of truth" which attempts to analyze "correspondence" in terms of a "mirroring" relationship between Cartesian inner representations and external reality, or in terms of some sort of structural relationship between propositions and facts, or in terms of disquotations, or whatever. Such theories are of philosophical interest, but we needn't get into them here, because it is the commonsense notion *itself* -- rather than merely some technical way of developing it -- that relativism takes aim at.

Again, common sense and traditional philosophy alike say that there is or can be a conformity or correspondence between thought and reality -- between our beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. on the one hand, and the way things really are on the other. Relativism denies this. There are different ways one might formulate this denial. One might say, for example, that there are no such things as *true* beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. There are only people's beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. themselves, and that's that. Truth drops away as a mere fiction. People *call* some of these more widely accepted beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. "truths," but this is at best a useful fiction, and we

should (on this view) never make reference to “truths” without using scare quotes. Let’s summarize this formulation as follows:

(I) There is no truth.

But the relativist need not say flatly that there is no truth. He might say instead (and perhaps most relativists would say instead) that there is truth, but not of an *absolute* sort. There is what is true for you, what is true for me, what is true for this culture, what is true for that culture, and so on. But there is no such thing as what is true *full stop*, no such thing as what is true absolutely, *apart from* what different individuals and cultures happen to think. That is to say, there is only what is true in a *relative* way (relative to those individuals, or to those cultures, or whatever). Let’s summarize this formulation as follows:

(II) There is no absolute truth.

Formulation (II) is clearly a formulation of relativism, but some readers might wonder whether (I) is really a formulation of relativism. For the proponent of (I) is saying not merely that truth is *relative*, but that it is *non-existent*. He is *eliminating* truth, rather than relativizing it. However, to the extent that the advocate of (I) is willing to use the word “truth” as long as there are scare quotes around it, it seems he is plausibly counted as a kind of relativist. He is saying, in effect, that there is what *this* group or individual falsely *calls* “truth,” what *that* group or individual falsely *calls* “truth,” but there is no actual truth at all. And insofar as he is thereby emphasizing, as the advocate of (II) does, that there is no genuine relation of conformity, correspondence, or truth between these different opinions on the one and reality on the other, he is saying something pretty close to what the advocate of (II) is saying.

Indeed, I would say that he is essentially saying the *same* thing as what the advocate of (II) is saying, but in a more straightforward way. Hence it is useful to consider formulation (I) as well as formulation (II), since (II) really collapses into (I), or so I will argue below.

(Momentarily to digress: There is a parallel here to eliminativism and reductionism in philosophy of mind. Eliminativism explicitly denies that some mental phenomenon or other -- qualia, say, or intentionality -- really exists. Reductionism does not explicitly deny that it exists, but claims that it is “really” something other than what it appears to be. A reductionist might hold, for example, that the quale of an experience is “really” “nothing but” a neural process of such-and-such a type. Like John Searle, I’ve long argued that reductionist theories in philosophy of mind tend to be disguised versions of eliminativism, *implicitly* denying the existence of the phenomena they claim to be explaining. Now, the formulations of relativism I’ve been considering -- formulations (I) and (II) -- are, I think, like that. Formulation (I) explicitly denies that truth exists, while formulation (II) does not, but instead claims that truth is “really” something other than what it appears to be. In particular, it is not a matter of a relation of correspondence between sets of beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. and a reality *external* to them, but rather something entirely *internal* to sets of beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. And just as reductionism in philosophy of mind collapses (I argue) into eliminativism, so too does formulation (II) collapse (I will argue) into (I). End of digression.)

So far we’ve been talking about what is sometimes called *global* relativism, which denies that there is absolute truth of *any* sort -- moral, scientific, religious, you name it. *Local* relativism is less radical. It acknowledges that there is absolute truth in *some* domains, such as natural science. But it denies, of certain *specific* domains of discourse, that they include any absolute truths. *Moral relativism* would be the best-known version of local relativism. It holds that, while some truths (such as scientific truths) might be absolute, no *moral* truths are absolute. I’ll come back to moral relativism, but let’s look now at the central problem with global relativism, whether formulated in terms of (I) or (II).

Either self-defeating or only trivially true

The problem with formulation (I) is pretty well-known: It is self-defeating. For suppose we ask about (I) -- the proposition that *there is no truth* -- whether it is *itself* true or not. If the proponent of (I) says that (I) *is* true, then it follows that there is at least one truth, namely (I) itself. But in that case (I) is *false*, since what it says that there are *no* truths. So, if (I) is true, then it is false. Suppose the proponent of (I) says instead, then, that (I) is not true. Then in that case too, (I) is false. So, either way it is false.

Now, the proponent of (I) may respond by saying that this objection presupposes that there *is* such a thing as truth and falsity, and that that is precisely what he denies. He might say: “Yes, *if* I were to claim that (I) is true, *then* I

would indeed be contradicting myself. But I'm *not* saying that (I) is true. But neither do I acknowledge that it is false. Rather, I refuse to speak in terms of truth or falsity at all."

The trouble with this response is that if the proponent of (I) refuses to characterize his utterances as either true or false, then he cannot really claim to be asserting any *proposition* or *statement* at all, since a proposition or statement is susceptible of being either true or false. His utterance of "There is no truth" will therefore have to be taken as a mere string of sounds lacking meaning or semantic content -- like a grunt or a moan -- rather than as a literal English sentence. He won't literally be saying anything with which we can intelligibly either agree or disagree. He also won't be saying anything that is logically inconsistent with maintaining that there is such a thing as truth, for the simple reason that a meaningless sound cannot be logically inconsistent with *anything*, since, lacking meaning or propositional content, it cannot bear any logical properties or relations (consistency, inconsistency, entailment, etc.) at all. Formulation (I) will therefore turn out to be of no more philosophical interest than yelling "Aargh!" is of philosophical interest.

Suppose the relativist opts instead, then, for formulation (II). He might suppose that he will be able thereby to avoid the problems with formulation (I), since he doesn't deny that there is truth, full stop, but only that there is *absolute* truth. But in fact he's not out of the woods. For suppose we ask about (II) -- again, the proposition that *there is no absolute truth* -- whether it is *itself* absolutely true or not. If the proponent of (II) says that (II) is absolutely true, then it follows that there is at least one absolute truth, namely (II) itself. But in that case (II) is *false*, since what it says is that there are *no* absolute truths. So, if (II) is absolutely true, then it is false. Answering "Yes" to our question will thus put the proponent of (II) into the same bind that the proponent of (I) is in if *he* answers "Yes" to the parallel question facing him.

So, suppose instead that the proponent of (II) answers "No." In other words, suppose he says that (II) is not absolutely true, but only relatively true. It is true for *him* and for other relativists, but not true for anyone else. But what exactly does this mean?

It cannot mean that the proponent's belief in (II) corresponds to reality -- even if just "for him" (whatever *that* would mean) -- because that would entail that there is something *external* to the beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. of individuals and cultures by virtue of which the beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. are either true or false. And in that case the relativist would be saying that (II) is true absolutely, which (as we've just seen) would be self-defeating. So, he has to mean something else. But what?

The only interpretation left of the claim that (II) is true "for him" would be that (II) is somehow true by virtue of something *internal* to his set of beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. In particular, it must mean that the belief that (II) is true happens to be among the members of his personal set of beliefs and opinions, and perhaps also that it follows from some of the other beliefs or opinions he has in that set. And by acknowledging that (II), being true only relatively and not absolutely, is not true for non-relativists, he must mean merely that the belief that (II) is true is not among the members of *their* personal sets of beliefs and opinions. For the relativist to assert that (II) is true for him but not for others ends up being equivalent to saying something like: "I don't myself believe in absolute truth, but other people do."

But that, of course, is completely trivial and uninteresting, telling us nothing we didn't already know. Certainly it does not entail that there is no absolute truth. It's just a report about some opinion the relativist finds he has floating around in his mind. And what more are we supposed to say to that than: "Um, thank you for sharing"?

But it's worse than that. For the proponent of (II) is not merely making the trivial assertion that he happens to have this belief floating around in his mind. He's also denying that there is anything *more* to a belief's being true than it's being among the beliefs one has floating around in one's mind. And how, exactly, does that differ from what the proponent of (I) thinks?

The proponent of (I) says: "There are no *true* beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. There are just the beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. themselves, and that's that. People falsely *call* some belief, opinion, statement, etc. 'true' when it happens to be among the beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. they affirm."

The proponent of (II), on analysis, essentially says: "There are no *absolutely* true beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. There are the beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. themselves, and a person's belief, opinion, statement, etc. is *relatively* true when it happens to be among the beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. he affirms."

Verbally these claims are different, since the proponent of (II) adds the adverbs “absolutely” and “relatively” so that he can retain the word “true.” But *substantively* they are identical. Saying “There is relative truth” amounts to the same thing as saying “There is ‘truth’ in the sense of there being what people *call* ‘true’.” And like the proponent of (I), the proponent of (II) thinks that there is nothing *more* to truth than that -- nothing more than being *called* “true.” So, the latter’s notion of “relative truth” is really just the same as the former’s notion of “‘truth’-in-scare-quotes.” In which case, saying “There is no absolute truth” does not really differ after all from saying “There is no truth” – unsurprisingly, since what the proponent of (II) calls “absolute truth” is just what common sense calls “truth.” Formulation (II) thus really amounts after all to formulation (I), and seems not to only because the proponent of (II) uses “truth” and “true” in a novel way. And thus it inherits all the problems of (I).

Bad arguments

So, formulations (I) and (II) of relativism are ultimately incoherent. Another problem is that there are no good arguments for either proposition. One well-known “popular” argument for relativism in its different versions appeals to the fact of disagreement as evidence for relativism. The argument might be summarized as follows:

- (1) Individuals and cultures differ in their beliefs, opinions, etc.
- (2) So, no beliefs, opinions, etc. are absolutely true but only relatively true.

Though many undergraduates seem to find this “reasoning” compelling, it is, of course, an absolutely atrocious argument. The fallacy should be obvious, but in case it isn’t, we can illustrate it with a simple example. Suppose that because of a heat mirage, Fred believes that there is water on the road ahead of him, whereas Bob, who is standing at the spot on the road Fred is looking at, believes that there is no water there. Fred and Bob thus differ in their beliefs about whether there is water on the road. The reason, though, is not because there is no absolute truth about whether there is water on the road. There is, absolutely, no water on the road, and Fred is just wrong. The reason for their difference of opinion is rather that Fred is making a mistake because of the illusion generated by the heat. So, a difference of beliefs doesn’t by itself entail relativism, so that the inference from (1) to (2) is a *non sequitur*.

A relativist might claim that this objection begs the question against him, but that is not the case. The objection doesn’t presuppose that there is in fact absolute truth. Rather, the objection merely points out that the thesis that there is absolute truth but that people can make mistakes about it is an alternative way to make sense of disagreements between them, so that the relativist needs to appeal to more than premise (1) if he is validly to infer to his conclusion (2). Indeed, if anyone is begging the question here, it is the relativist, because to get from (1) to (2) validly he will have to add some premise to the effect that differences in beliefs, opinions, etc. cannot be made sense of if truth is absolute, but only if it is relative. And no one who is not already a relativist would accept such a premise.

On the other hand, as we have seen, formulation (II) of relativism, if it is going to avoid self-refutation, will have to be read in such a way that it is trivially true. In particular, it is going to have to be interpreted as the claim that the relativist does not personally believe in absolute truth -- a claim which is, of course, correct, but which in no way entails that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Relativism, on this interpretation, reduces to the trivially true thesis that people have different beliefs. In that case, we might read (2) as just a colorful restatement of (1). That is to say, we might read the claim that there is no absolute truth but only relative truth as entailing nothing more than that people have different beliefs and opinions. In that case, the inference from (1) to (2) will be tautologous and thus perfectly valid. But (2) will also end up saying something that the non-relativist can happily accept, since (of course) the non-relativist does not deny that (1) is true.

So, the inference from (1) to (2) is either a non sequitur, or question-begging, or a tautology. And that makes it a very bad argument indeed.

Another sort of argument for relativism is the postmodernist appeal to the influence that cultural assumptions, those in positions of power, etc. have on the beliefs that people hold. The idea here is that what we think we “know” is what has been handed on to us by our parents, churches, schools and textbooks, governmental authorities, mass media, and so on. And all of these sources reflect certain vested interests. The content of the “knowledge” passed on would be different if the sources reflected different interests, and indeed is different in different societies. This is similar to the appeal to disagreement between individuals and cultures, which we just discussed, but the emphasis on the vested interests of those in power adds a novel sinister element that is supposed to make it especially doubtful that what we take ourselves to “know” reflects any absolute truth. (The relationship between knowledge and power

is a theme often associated with Michel Foucault, though as many commentators have emphasized, it doesn't follow that Foucault himself really intended to draw a relativist conclusion from it.)

This argument might be summarized as follows:

(3) What people regard as true is radically influenced by their cultural surroundings, by who holds positions of power in their society, etc., and by the vested interests reflected in these sources of purported truth.

(4) So, there is no truth, or at least no absolute truth.

This is also a very bad argument. One problem with it is that it is, like the previous argument considered, simply a non sequitur. And once again, a simple example will illustrate the problem. Suppose you and I are in a bar and that it is raining heavily outside but that I don't realize that it is. Suppose you get me to believe that it is, but not in the ordinary way, e.g. by just telling me or by getting me to look out the window. Rather, suppose you employ various techniques to brainwash or hypnotize me into believing that it is raining. And suppose that your reason for doing so is that you want to make absolutely sure that I will not leave the bar but will stay inside it and buy everybody another round of drinks. Of course the example is silly, but it illustrates the point that the fact that someone has, for selfish motives, manipulated me into believing something, does not entail that what I've been manipulated into believing is not absolutely true. In the example, it *is* still absolutely true that it is raining heavily outside. The fact that I've been brainwashed by a person who just wants to get a free drink does not change that in the least. But the same thing is true when we're thinking on the large scale of societies and the cultural and political institutions that shape opinions within them. Even if opinions were shaped in the most manipulative way possible and for the most suspect of motives, it simply wouldn't follow that the opinions are not true, and certainly it wouldn't follow that there is no absolute truth of any sort.

Once again, it will not do for the relativist to claim that this objection begs the question, because it does not beg the question. It does not presuppose that there is in fact absolute truth. Rather, it simply points out that there are hypothetical scenarios in which there could be absolute truth even though people are manipulated into believing things for suspect motives. Hence the relativist needs to add some further premise to (3) if he is validly going to derive (4) from it. And if he adds a premise to the effect that absolute truth could not even in principle exist where people's beliefs are shaped by cultural circumstances reflective of vested interests, etc., then *he* will be the one begging the question.

A second problem with this sort of argument is that it is self-defeating -- and not merely because the relativist *conclusion*, considered just by itself, is, for the reasons set out earlier, self-defeating. The argument would also undermine both its own *premise* and the *inference* from the premise to the conclusion. For why should we accept the premise, and why should we accept whatever canons of inference would license reasoning from the premise to the conclusion? Maybe *those too* are things we accept only because we've been manipulated into doing so via our cultural surroundings by people who have vested interests, etc. E.g. maybe Foucault's own books are a subtle part of the apparatus by which those in power maintain their hold over us, and are for that reason suspect.

This brings us to a third, related problem with the argument in question, which is that it is never applied consistently. It is only ever deployed in order to undermine moral and political views the relativist doesn't like, but not in order to undermine moral and political views the relativist *does* like -- even though it would in fact undermine the latter no less than the former.

Hence, if religious claims, or free market economics, or traditional views about sexual morality, or otherwise "right-wing" ideas are being defended by someone, the postmodernist relativist will respond by saying that we live in a society that is still very reactionary and whose ruling classes benefit from people's accepting such conservative ideas, that contrary left-wing views are often denigrated and made invisible by being kept out of textbooks and mass media, that we ought therefore to regard all "right-wing" arguments with suspicion, etc.

But if secularist claims, or socialist economics, or liberal attitudes about sexuality, or otherwise left-wing ideas are being defended by someone, the postmodernist relativist does *not* respond by saying that we live in a society that has gotten very secularist and liberal in recent decades, that the journalists, professors, and entertainers who shape popular culture favor these secularist and liberal tendencies and try to promote them, that contrary conservative ideas are often denigrated and made invisible by being kept out of college textbooks and syllabi and ridiculed in movies, television, and other mass media, that we ought therefore to regard all left-wing arguments with suspicion, etc.

Now there is no non-question-begging reason why postmodernist relativism would support the first line of argument but not the second. So, to be consistent, the postmodernist relativist will have to apply his relativism across the board and admit that it takes down *all* ideas – left-wing, right-wing, secular, religious, you name it. Indeed, it will take down *postmodernist relativism itself*. For given the postmodernist relativist line of argument, *any* system of ideas, including postmodernist relativism itself, may for all we know merely be something we've come to accept because we've been indoctrinated into it within a certain culture whose dominant members benefit from our doing so. For example, postmodernist left-wing types benefit from students and educated people taking postmodernist relativism seriously, because this will help to promote the social and political agenda postmodernist left-wing types favor, will help to enhance the reputations of postmodernist left-wing types as serious social critics to whom attention must be paid, etc. So, by the postmodernist relativist's own criteria, we should apply a "hermeneutics of suspicion" to postmodernist relativism itself.

Suppose, to avoid this result, the postmodernist relativist claims that the truth of left-wing ideas somehow *transcends* cultural circumstances and power relationships within a society in a way that "right-wing" ideas allegedly do not, and that this is what justifies him in applying his analysis to criticize the "right-wing" ideas but not the left-wing ideas. The problem with this is that he is now admitting that there is after all such a thing as absolute truth and has therefore given up relativism.

So, there is no way to resolve this inconsistency. Either the postmodernist relativist applies his relativism across the board, in which case it takes down even the left-wing ideas he wants to promote, including postmodernist relativism itself; or he does not apply it across the board, in which case he ends up admitting after all that there is absolute truth. Either way, postmodernist relativism, like other versions of relativism, ends up being self-defeating.

Yet another argument sometimes thought to support relativism is the appeal to tolerance. The idea here is that belief in absolute truth leads to dogmatism and intolerance, which can therefore be counteracted if we affirm instead that truth is relative. But there are two problems with this argument. First, the conclusion doesn't follow from the premise. Even if it were the case that relativism would promote tolerance and undermine dogmatism, that simply doesn't entail that relativism is correct. Even if believing in Santa Claus had various psychological benefits, it wouldn't follow that Santa Claus exists; even if believing that Sally is in love with you would make you happier and healthier, the sad truth may nevertheless be that Sally hates your guts; and in general, the fact that believing a certain proposition *p* may have various good effects, by itself is no reason to think that *p* is true.

Second, the premise is in any event false. Relativism does not promote tolerance and undermine dogmatism. On the contrary, relativism promotes dogmatism and intolerance. As Lynch points out, if there's only what is true *for me* and what is true *for you*, but no such thing as what is true *full stop*, then there is also no such thing as being *wrong*, being in *error*. To be true, on the relativist view, just amounts to being a part of some person or culture's set of beliefs, opinions, etc. And for any of these beliefs, opinions, etc. to be wrong or erroneous would require that there be absolute truth over and above these sets of beliefs and opinions, to which they fail to correspond. But if you are never wrong -- if everything you believe is *true for you* -- then why shouldn't you dogmatically cling to whatever it is you believe? And why not go the next step and deny toleration to those who disagree with you? (Indeed, why couldn't those who reject tolerance as an ideal defend their rejection on relativist grounds? Why can't they say: "It is true *for me* and for *my* culture that intolerance and dogmatism are good, so nyah nyah!")

Moral relativism

Finally, we come to moral relativism. Suppose someone rejects *global* relativism, so as to avoid all the problems identified so far, and instead endorses only a *local* form of relativism, with respect to moral claims specifically. He admits that there is absolute truth in some domains of discourse, such as natural science, at least some parts of philosophy, and so forth. But he claims that there is no absolute truth where morality is concerned. There are the moral claims you think are true, the moral claims I think are true, the moral claims this culture says are true, the moral claims that culture says are true, and so forth. But there is, the moral relativist holds, no such thing as a moral claim that is true *full stop*, in an absolute way.

So far, this version of relativism will not be self-defeating in the way that global relativism is. But it nevertheless has problems that are similar to the problems with global relativism. First of all, recall that I argued that formulation (II) of global relativism collapses into formulation (I). That is to say, to claim that all truth is relative is implicitly to deny that there is any such thing as truth at all. The claim that *there is no absolute truth but only relative truth* really differs only verbally and not substantively from the claim that *there is no truth, but only the beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. that people falsely call "true."* But by the same token, saying that *there is no absolute moral truth but*

only relative moral truth really differs only verbally, and not substantively, from the claim that *there is no moral truth, but only the moral beliefs, opinions, statements, etc. that people falsely call "true."* So, though moral relativism seems not to be eliminating morality but only relativizing it, in reality it is eliminating it in a disguised way. *Implicitly* it is saying that there are no moral truths at all, that morality as such is an illusion.

One consequence of this is that it will not do to claim that moral relativism is any more likely to promote tolerance and undermine dogmatism than global relativism is. On the contrary, moral relativism too can only give aid and comfort to intolerance and dogmatism. For if morality is an illusion, there can be no moral reason not to be intolerant and dogmatic.

But even if moral relativism did not implicitly undermine all morality, it would still facilitate rather than undermine intolerance and dogmatism. For if there is only what is morally true *for me* and what is morally true *for you*, but no such thing as what is morally true *full stop*, then there is also no such thing as being morally *wrong* or in *error*. For, again, if there is nothing outside your set of beliefs (in this case, beliefs about morality) by reference to which they can be judged wrong, then there just is no such thing as being wrong. And if you can't be morally wrong, why shouldn't you be dogmatic about your moral views, and intolerant of competing views? Again, why couldn't someone claim, on relativist grounds: "For *me* and for *my* culture, it is *morally good* to be dogmatic about our moral beliefs and to be intolerant of anyone who disagrees with them"?

There are other problems with moral relativism. One of them is that the standard popular argument for it is just a variation on the first argument for global relativism considered earlier. In particular, it is an inference from the premise that *cultures differ in their moral beliefs* to the conclusion that *there are no absolute moral truths*. And this argument is just as bad as that earlier argument. For one thing, it too is simply a non sequitur. (You might as well argue that since *cultures have disagreed about geography* -- since some of them left North and South America off their maps, included Atlantis, etc. -- it follows that *there are no absolute geographical truths*.) And as with the earlier argument, attempts to save this argument from being a non sequitur will only turn it into either a question-begging argument or a tautology.

Another well-known problem with moral relativism enters the picture if we add to it (as some moral relativists would) the thesis that it is wrong to judge other cultures except by their own moral standards. If this were correct, then we couldn't condemn chattel slavery, genocide, etc. if these practices reflected the moral norms of the societies in which they occurred. Indeed, we would have to criticize those who worked to *end* slavery, genocide, etc. for violating the norms of their cultures. Yet many relativists would (rightly) condemn these practices and praise those who worked to end them.

The problem of inconsistency runs deeper than this, though. For consider again the thesis that it is wrong to judge other cultures except by their own moral standards. Is this thesis *itself* absolutely true or only relatively true? If the moral relativist says that it is absolutely true, then he has admitted that there is after all such a thing as absolute moral truth, and thereby undermined his own position. But if he says that it is only relatively true, then his assertion turns out to amount to little more than the uninteresting claim that moral relativists think it is wrong to judge other cultures except by their own moral standards, though non-relativists don't think this is wrong. In other words, when coupled with the thesis in question, moral relativism, like global relativism, turns out to be either self-defeating or trivial.

So, moral relativism, like global relativism, is a complete mess. As with any other philosophical position, there are moves that might be made to try to salvage the view, but the trick in this case is to do so without either falling back into the incoherence problems we've considered, or ending up so qualifying the position that it is no longer really relativist at all. And that is, I submit, a trick which cannot be pulled off.