

## Robert L Arrington's Contribution to the Concept of Conceptual Relativism

By

Dr. Asha Nimali Fernando, Senior Lecturer, Department of Philosophy and Psychology,

University of Sri Jayewardenepura

Sri Lanka

### **Abstract:**

*American philosopher Robert L Arrington is a specialist for moral philosophy, the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein as well the philosophical psychology. His contribution to modern moral debate we can be traced from his written-on Rationalism, Realism, And Relativism: Perspectives in Contemporary Moral Epistemology (1989). From his work Arrington took morality in seriously and study its side by side in comparison with rationalist views with the realism and then move to relativism he has identify the common objections to relativism. These objections refer to theories like social rules relativism. Such theories offer explanation of how rules of social group come into being and are to be rejected because they are in danger of 'becoming either an objectivist or subjectivist theory, so that one must find a theory which moral judgement are "relative to something for which a rational justification is not possible-indeed, for which such a justification is inconceivable' Then with the reference to and deep investigation of rationalism, realism and relativism Arrington devoted to the development of his own cognitive moral epistemological theory which he terms conceptual relativism. To come to this logical conclusion Arrington expounds and evaluates the metaethical views of a variety of important contemporary figures such as, John Rawls, Bernard Gert, Alan Gewirth, John McDowell etc., Frequently his exposition is lucid and illuminating. In his evaluative remarks he looks for insights as well as errors in the views under discussion, considers some of the criticisms already in the literature, and offers challenging and sometimes incisive objections of his own. This critical account of the resurgence of cognitive metaethics (especially of moral epistemology) made significance turning point to the debate on moral relativism. The main purpose of this study is that to critically evaluate the Robert L Arrington argument against to the moral relativism and universalism with special reference to his idea on moral grammar. As well this study analyzes and evaluate his own ideology on conceptual relativism. The methodology of this study is involving the prescriptive analysis. Therefore, this included the textual and conceptual analysis.*

**Key words:** Relativism, universalism, conceptual relativism,

## **Introduction**

Robert L Arrington develops a version of moral relativism he himself calls it conceptual relativism. In a nutshell, it is the view that moral principles are relative to a concept of morality. Arrington's conceptual relativism is something of a hybrid in that it accommodates universalism to the extent that he believes that there is one and only one universally correct set of moral principles. He calls these rules of moral grammar. An example of a rule of moral grammar is: 'Lying is morally wrong'. According to Arrington, although the rules of moral grammar are universal, they may not necessary be subscribed to by everyone, and a lack of subscription to these rules does not indicate any sort of irrationality or any error about factual matters. I will explain the notion of a rule of moral grammar more fully below, after first explaining some of the terminology Arrington uses in situating his conceptual relativism.

Arrington employs a series of complex distinction to create a theoretical space within which he positions his theory and from which he opposes other metaethical theories, including other sorts of moral relativism. He distinguishes different varieties of absolutism from different varieties of subjectivism. I will not rehearse all the details of these divisions, but merely present the ones that are most relevant to my discussion.

## **Nature of Nonobjectivism.**

The most important terms that Arrington introduces are "nonobjectivism," as his conceptual relativism is presented as a variety of nonobjectivism. The nonobjectivist is distinguished by what he rejects, and that is both moral objectivism and moral subjectivism. Arrington is determined to come up with a theory of moral relativism that is nonobjectivist.

When discussing the opponent of the moral relativist Arrington does not at first glance seem to recognize that a distinction can be drawn between moral absolutism and what I have called moral universalism (I used the term universalist to the person who is opposed to moral relativism). Instead, he lumps together a commitment to 'absolute moral truth' with a commitment to universal standards of moral value true for all human beings and calls that moral absolutism. It is only the second sort of commitment, a commitment to what I have called moral universalism, that necessarily makes one an opponent of the moral relativist. It would not be inconsistent to hold that moral truths were absolute by virtue of being unable to be overridden, while also at the same time being relative, or context dependent.

However, Arrington is perhaps aware of this possibility as he later distinguishes between three forms of absolutism. These are moral absolutism, epistemological and metaphysical absolutism. The crucial distinction for Arrington is between moral absolutism and epistemological absolutism. What Arrington calls moral absolutism is close to what I have called moral universalism, that is, the commitment to the idea that there is one and only one universal set of moral principles, whereas what he calls epistemological absolutism concerns the question of whether these moral principles could be rejected without error or irrationality? This is a vital distinction for Arrington to make his position is to accept what he calls moral absolutism.

He thinks that different groups or individuals may be completely aware of all the relevant nonmoral empirical information and be completely rational but be using a mistaken concept of morality that can lead them to reject the universally correct set of moral principles (the rules of moral grammar). Clearly Arrington must be committed to a reasonably sharp distinction between nonmoral factual information and what might be called moral information (for instance, what the one correct concept of morality is) for him to be able to claim that a person or group could be in possession of all the relevant information of the first kind, and yet not be in possession of information of the second kind.

The American philosophers like Harman and Wong focus on the functional role played by moral principles, believing that the occupant of this role may vary, Arrington focuses on the occupant of this role, believing that it may not vary. For example, according to Arrington the ancient Greeks were morally wrong to keep human slaves, although they were not making any factual error or being irrational when they practiced human slavery. There was a concept that occupied the role in ancient Greek society that the concept of morality occupies in our society, but the ancient Greek's concept was not the concept of morality. They may have reasoned impeccably about human slavery, but because for them a concept other than morality occupied the role of the concept of morality, they inevitably came to the incorrect conclusion about the moral status of human slavery. Looking at another example, one of the two opposed sides of the abortion debate is morally wrong, although this side is not thereby making any factual mistakes or being irrational. As each side has a different concept occupying the role of the concept of morality, they come to different conclusions about the moral status of abortion. However, only one side (or perhaps neither side) actually has the concept of morality occupying the relevant role, so at most one side draws the correct conclusion about abortion.

### Arrington's Argument on 'Moral Principles'

One of the most distinctive features of Arrington's conceptual relativism is his insistence that the point of moral principles is not to resolve conflict or create a stable society or any other sort of non-moral goal, but rather it is simply to encourage actions that are morally right and discourage actions that are morally wrong. As he put it:

Moral rules have moral ends, and whether in fact they promote still other ends is irrelevant to their justification.<sup>1</sup>

He asks a number of rhetorical questions designed to build up the credibility of this assertion: "Do not moral rules have their own intrinsic end—namely, the promotion of morally correct behavior? Many societies have rules prohibiting cruelty, but are these because cruelty is seen as promoting conflict and instability or because it is seen as an immoral way for one person to treat another? Is injustice denounced simply because it upsets a balance of interests or rather because it is unfair and wrong?"<sup>2</sup>

This is major tenet of Arrington's conceptual relativism, the doctrine that moral principles have moral goals. The key claim here is that moral principles do not stand in need of justification in terms of some other non-moral goal in order for them to achieve their purpose as moral principles. Now there are at least two different ways that such a conception of moral principles could be understood. One could say that it is not *necessary* for moral principles to receive a nonmoral justification in order to achieve their purpose as moral principles, or one could go further and say that it is not *possible* for moral principles to receive a nonmoral justification. Arrington's commitment to develop a nonobjectivist version of moral relativism leads him to adopt the second, far stronger and more stringent interpretation of the formula that moral principles have moral goals. As it was the specter of objectivism though the rational justification of moral principles that he believed was so awkward for Harman and Wong when critiquing their versions of moral relativism, Arrington asserts that moral principles must be "relative to something for which a rational justification is not possible."<sup>3</sup> If it is not possible to give a rational justification of moral principles then there is no danger of falling into objectivism and Arrington's goal of producing a nonobjectivist version of moral relativism will not be jeopardized. The implications of the

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<sup>1</sup> Arrington, Robert L. (1989). *Rationalism, Realism and Relativism: Perspectives in Contemporary Moral Epistemology*. Ithaca, N.Y, Cornell University Press, p.250.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

claim that it is not possible (as opposed to not necessary) to justify moral principles resonate throughout Arrington's theory and create what I consider to be some strongly counterintuitive implication. These will be addressed below.

First, I must fill in some further details of Arrington's notion of rules of moral grammar. Arrington paints a picture of the nature of moral discourse that derives from broadly Wittgenstein notions about language that Arrington relocates to the field of metaethics. The most notable of these is Arrington's claim that the moral principles that jointly define our concept of morality are "rules of moral grammar."<sup>4</sup> He also characterizes them as "rules for talking and thinking about morality"<sup>5</sup> and says: "The rules of moral grammar are universal, a priori, and necessary, not contingent, debatable generalizations that are matters of mere belief."<sup>6</sup> Because of the significance of this idea for Arrington, I will go into some details in explain it.

### **Arrington's on Rules of Moral Grammar.**

When Arrington talks about moral principles being rules of moral grammar, he takes these rules to be defining assumptions forming the linguistic background that makes moral discourse possible. A rule of moral grammar such as: 'Lying is morally wrong,' is not something the truth or falsity of which can be argued about using moral language, as rules of moral grammar provide the very grounds for moral discussion. Arrington points out that:

The rules of moral grammar are used to introduce a person to the moral dimension [...] functional as an element of the presupposed background of moral discourse and not, for the most part, as ingredients in its content.<sup>7</sup>

This is not denied that it may be possible for a moral dispute to arise over whether an agent is permitted to lie in a particular situation. This might occur because the two sides in such a dispute may disagree over just what factors are most important when applying the moral principle in this situation, whether the principle may properly be overridden or outweighed by countervailing considerations, and so forth. What they are not disagreeing over, however, is the general applicability of the moral principle dictating that "it is wrong to tell lie."<sup>8</sup> It is a commitment by both sides to the rule of moral grammar embodied in this principle that is what allows the dispute to even proceed; common agreement on the moral

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.269.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 275.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 291.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.282.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 271.

principle form the background without which the disagreement could not meaningfully arise.

There is no difficulty with imagining a case in which it was arguable the morally correct thing to do to tell a lie, perhaps because of some other moral rule is judged to take precedence on this occasion. However, making such a decision in a case like this would not amount to a rejection of the general moral principle: 'Lying is morally wrong'. It would instead be a reluctant recognition that "unfortunately, we had to tell a lie on these occasions, that is, we were forced to do something that remains morally dubious."<sup>9</sup> Arrington notes that while moral disagreement may arise over a wider variety of topics, we never disagree over whether it is in general morally wrong to tell lie, or to break promises or commit murder.

According to this conception of moral discourse, we cannot reject rules of moral grammar within the context of a moral discussion because these rules are the presuppositions that enable us to use moral language. One could not participate in the practice of moral discourse while at the same time rejecting the indispensable background assumptions that make this discourse possible. Someone who rejected the moral principle that says that it is wrong to lie would not be making a move within the moral disagreement described above, they would instead be showing by this rejection that they are, as far as Arrington is concerned, operating with a concept other than morality. The rules of grammar must be accepted as presupposition by those who wish to engage in moral discourse, and a rejection of these rules amounts to a refusal to engage in moral discourse. Any such rejection does not threaten the appropriateness of the rules themselves as the foundation of moral discourse, but rather places the one who reject them outside the domain of moral discourse. This would not prevent them from participating in other sorts of normative discussion such as prudential discussion, but participation in moral discourse would not be open to them.

Arrington's analogy between moral principles and grammatical rules could do with some clarification. Presumably the idea that when it comes to a grammatical rule such as where to place the possessive apostrophe, there is no real answer to the question: 'why is the apostrophe placed where it is in this case? The answer is simply: 'Because that is what the rule dictates. There is nothing further that needs to be said, or that can be said. No justification of the placement of the possessive apostrophe where the grammatical rules dictate is simply being ungrammatical. This sort of situation with respect to morality is what

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<sup>9</sup> Arrington, Robert L. (1989). *Rationalism, Realism and Relativism: Perspectives in Contemporary Moral Epistemology*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, p.272.

Arrington is trying to create with his idea that moral principles are rules of moral grammar. When it comes to articulating what the rules of moral grammar are that constitute morality, Arrington says the following:

Morality has to do with personal autonomy and integrity, respect for person, avoidance of harm to persons and similar notions.<sup>10</sup>

He is ready to acknowledge that there is some vagueness around the edges and backs off from an extensive analysis of our concept of morality, but he does give some examples of what he considers some of the most important rules of moral grammar. These are: “It is wrong to tell a lie”, “One ought to keep one’s promises”, “one ought not to harm other people”, “It is wrong to treat others disrespectfully”, and “One must not take the life of an innocent person.”<sup>11</sup>

Arrington also distinguishes between rules of moral grammar and what he calls “substantive moral principles.”<sup>12</sup> These latter are, “moral principles and rules concerning which there can be legitimate moral disagreement”<sup>13</sup> Examples of these are: “Premarital sex is wrong”, “One ought to be patriotic”, “Mercy killing is wrong”, “One ought to lead a simple and frugal life”, and “One ought to give a quarter of one’s income to charity.”<sup>14</sup> The moral discussions that take place when we disagree as background assumptions (substantive moral principles should not be confused with moral principle).

Furthermore, it is sometimes the case that people will take rules of moral grammar as substantive moral principles. Arrington gives as example: “One ought never to tell lie”, “One ought always to keep one’s promises”, and “One should never kill another human being, in a war, or self –defense.”<sup>15</sup> The differences between a rule of moral grammar such as ‘It is wrong to tell lie’, and a substantive moral principles like ‘One ought never to tell lie’, is that the former may not be disputed by those who wish to engage in moral discourse, whereas the latter certainly may be. The former identifies a morally relevant dimension of life that must always be considered whenever moral discussion occurs, but that does not preclude the possibility that sometimes we may be morally required lie. The latter is the contingent product of moral discussion and debate, and its rejection need not mean the rejection of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.p.252.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.p.302.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.p.276.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.p.302

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

morality. Arrington puts it thus:

The grammatical rule is unexceptionable, but the substantive rule requires considerable defense.<sup>16</sup>

According to Arrington, understanding of the rules of moral grammar is not only necessary to being able to participate in moral discourse, but it also necessary to even understanding what morality is. According to his conceptual relativism there is no logically prior grasp of morality that precedes a comprehension of the rules of moral grammar. “One does not understand *morality* by grasping a general definition of it; one understands it by knowing that we are morally obligated to tell the truth and keep our promises, as well as avoiding harming others and respect them.”<sup>17</sup> Morality is what he calls “a determinable notion, defined though its determinants.”<sup>18</sup> Arrington draws an analogy with the concept of color. The following two paragraphs are worth quoting in full as an account of Arrington’s notion of rules of moral grammar:

Rules of moral grammar can fruitfully be compared to grammatical rules like ‘Red is a Color’. The latter defines ‘red’ by saying that it designates a color. But equally it partially defines ‘color’.... We have no general concept of color allowing us to discover that red is a color. Color is a determinable property and one that is defined through its determinants-color is red, yellow, green, blue, and so on. These definitions jointly define color and thereby introduce us to the color dimension of experience.

Likewise, “One ought to keep one’s promises” and “It is wrong to tell a lie”, simultaneously serve to define, on the one hand, ‘keeping one’s promises’ and ‘lying’ and, on the other hand, the moral notions of obligation and wrongdoing. “Morality what we ought to do” and “what it is right for us to do”-as well as “what we ought not to do” and “what it is wrong to do-are determinable notions. They have no identifiable content in addition to such notions as keeping one’s promises, telling the truth, breaking promises, lying, and so on.”<sup>19</sup>

The rules of moral grammar embodied in the tradition Arrington appeals to together constitute the concept of morality. According to Arrington, this is the *only* concept that deserves the name ‘morality’, and other sets of principles do not and indeed could not count as alternative moralities. Other sets of principles would not have anything at all to do with morality, because the meaning of that term is exhausted by the list of moral principles that make up the concept of morality. Due to the nature of the concept, the single correct morality has no rivals and can have no rivals. “Our moral system constitutes morality: nothing else does.”<sup>20</sup> While we may have normative discussions other than moral ones, and even consider that the results of these discussions are more compelling when it comes to deciding on our actions, the rules of moral grammar can have no other challengers within the field of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.p.278.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.p.283.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.p.284.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.p.283.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

morality.

Furthermore, it is a crucial claim for Arrington that it is impossible to justify the rules of moral grammar. For the nonobjectivist such as Arrington no rational justification is possible and to try to look for it is to misunderstand the nonobjectivist nature of the concept of morality. According to Arrington, our concept of morality “has no ground in truth and reason. It is beyond proof and beyond refutation.”<sup>21</sup>

To the conceptual relativist, those who do not subscribe to the rules of moral grammar are employing a different concept of morality to us, or to be more accurate, because he believes that, “the notion that there could be alternative moralities basically makes no sense,”<sup>22</sup> those who do not subscribe to the rules of moral grammar are using a concept other than morality when they make certain normative judgments. He thinks that while moral condemnation of all those who do not subscribe to the rules of moral grammar is the proper and suitable response, this condemnation does not mean that it is possible for the rules of moral grammar to be in any way rationally justified to those who do not follow or who reject the rules of moral grammar are guilty of any sort of irrationality or error. Arrington’s conceptual relativism, as an explicitly nonobjectivist theory, does not allow for the rational justification of the rules of moral grammar, so those who follow these rules are not doing so because they have been rationally persuaded to.

As noted earlier, the conceptual relativist believes that the Ancient Greeks, for instance, may have been acting immorally by keeping slaves but they were not acting irrationally or making any sort of logical or factual mistakes, and it would be impossible for us to reason with them about the moral status of human slavery. In Arrington’s view those who do not follow the moral rules have not made any errors; “they are simply different, and their lives revolve around a different concept of morality,”<sup>23</sup> Although as I have noted above, it seems that Arrington should be saying here: ‘their lives revolve around a concept other than morality.’ Groups with different forms of life to ours may operate with concepts other than morality and there is no rational way of conducting any sort of dialogue with them about this. This strong commitment to nonobjectivism makes Arrington’s conceptual relativism a most distinctive form of moral relativism.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.p.257.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.p.287.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.p.256.

Although there is no way that we can rationally justify the rules of moral grammar to those who do not subscribe to them, the conceptual relativist is by no means tolerant of such other. Arrington says:

We are not in logical disagreement with them, for we do not share the same logical or conceptual space. Our practice is pragmatically incompatible with theirs-ours commits us to actions that physically cannot take place if the actions required by their practice are to occur.<sup>24</sup>

Arrington is blunt about the possible outcome of any disagreements we may encounter with those who do not subscribe to the rules of moral grammar: “To make our way of life possible, it may be the case that theirs must go. The result would be open conflict, perhaps war.”<sup>25</sup> It may be possible for the conceptual relativist to ignore those who are mistaken about morality so long as there is no possibility of interaction between them and us, for example our society and that of the ancient Greeks. But if there are disputes within our own society between those who subscribe to the rules of moral grammar and those who do not then there is no possibility of any sort of compromise.

Furthermore, under conceptual relativism there are severe restrictions on what forms of amoralism are possible. According to the conceptual relativist there could not be an amoralist who regarded morality as some kind of error or illusion while still having an intellectual understanding of what was involved when one lied, broke a promise, and so forth, because to understand these notions is to realise that they are morally wrong. It is not just that Arrington’s conceptual relativist would disagree with such a form of amoralism, but that he thinks such a position could not even be possible. So, an error theorist such as Mackie would be attempting to adopt a position that according to the conceptual relativist it is impossible to adopt. The only sort of amoralism possible would be a kind of individualistic amoralism according to which one placed oneself outside morality (presumably by rejecting the rules of moral grammar) while at the same time accepting that actions such as lying and so on were indeed still morally wrong for everyone else who had not rejected the rules of moral grammar.

## **Conclusion**

Arrington achieved some genuine insight into the nature of moral discourse with his notion of the rules of moral grammar are presuppositions that must be accepted as a condition of participating in the practice of morality. As well, we have discussed under the title of rules

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.p.261.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.p.260.

of moral grammar that there is no room for the fact/value distinction within conceptual relativism. For example, someone who might seem to understand a factual description of lying—that it is knowingly deceiving another—but who does not believe that lying is morally wrong, apparently does not really understand what it is to lie. Those who operate with a concept other than morality do not have what might be called ‘a different perspective’ on lying, murder, and so on—it appears they literally do not understand what these activities are.

This is inconsistent with the epistemological nonobjectivism that is such a vital part of conceptual relativism. Epistemological nonobjectivism entails that the rules of moral grammar may be rejected without error for someone to believe that lying, for instance, was not morally wrong or was morally neutral would mean that they were not only making an error about the contents of the concept of lying but were also making an error if they believed that they understood what lying was. Therefore, conceptual relativism is inconsistent.

Arrington’s moral relativism is far from a conventional version of the view. Some of the claims that the conceptual relativist is committed to are claims that a traditional moral relativist would probably be horrified to hear. These include the claims that those other groups who do not accept our rules of moral grammar are acting immorally whenever they breach these rules no matter what they may think about the rules, or even whether they are aware of them at all. What is more, as such groups cannot be morally reasoned with, it may be that the only appropriate response we can make when encountering such groups is to attempt their extinction. This is a far cry from the moral relativist as traditionally thought of someone who advocate tolerance of groups that follow different moral rules to ours, because ‘our moral rules are correct for us, and their moral rules are correct for them’. Of course, just because Arrington’s conceptual relativism develops in a non-traditional direction need not necessarily make it suspect. In his defense Arrington could point to the difficulties that a moral relativist should incorporate a serious commitment to tolerance into his theory of moral relativism.

Still, there is far more than just tradition that a critic of Arrington might appeal to in expressing their alarm at the implications that his view has for our treatment of those groups that may reject or not be aware of the rules of moral grammar. The major problem is not that Arrington classifies the so-called moral practices of such a group as not really being moral, but rather that it seems we cannot even understand what it is that these other groups are doing when they follow such practice. The difficulty lies in how we are supposed to be able to

recognise or identify any practice are being what we might, until we encountered conceptual relativism, naively have wanted to call an alternate morality.

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