Louis Pojman: Against Relativism and For Objectivism

I. Philosophical arguments aspire to the form of deductive validity.

This means that philosophers strive to make their arguments deductively valid. A deductively valid argument is one where if the premises are true, the conclusion can't possibly be false (it has the right logical form such that this will be the case). So what a philosopher tries to do is construct a valid argument form, and then make sure that the premises ARE true. In such a case, the conclusion cannot be false. If so, no better argument for that conclusion can be given.

With that in mind,

II. Pojman's Strategy Against the Argument for relativism:

P1. Beliefs about what is right and wrong differ across cultures (the Diversity thesis).
P2. What is right and wrong is dependent upon, or relative to, culture (the Dependency thesis).

---

C1. Thus, there is no objective right and wrong.

Pojman recognizes that this is a valid argument. As such, IF the premises are true, the conclusion (which denies moral objectivism) must be true. If moral objectivism must be false, then moral relativism must be true. Pojman tries to attack this argument.

The attack has two stages.

STAGE ONE: show that one or more of the premises (of the relativist's argument) are NOT true. If Pojman can do this, then even if the argument is valid, the truth of the conclusion will not necessarily follow (because it would only follow IF the premises were true).

*Note: Even if Pojman is successful, showing that the conclusion is not necessarily true does not entail that it is false. It simply shows that the conclusion could be false.

STAGE TWO: show that the conclusion is false by showing that the reverse of the conclusion must be true. In other words, Pojman's project here will be to show that moral objectivism must be true. If it must be true, then the claim that there is no objective right and wrong cannot be true.

If he succeeds in both stages, the argument for relativism is defeated.
III. Pojman's Stage One Argument

Pojman must show that one or more of the premises in the argument for relativism is (or are) false. Now Pojman realizes that the first premise (called P1 in the argument for relativism) is not objectionable. What this means is that there is no reason why Pojman would need to find it false. As a matter of fact, Pojman thinks it is true. If you go to various cultures, you will find various different definitions of right and wrong. Is this harmful to moral objectivism?

If Pojman acknowledges that P1 is true, does this harm moral objectivism? No. Recall why Ruth Benedict's argument (which is really just P1) doesn't work to get you relativism on its own. The reason is this: one cannot validly move from a statement about beliefs to a statement about fact. If you could, then this argument would be conclusive:

P1. Beliefs about what is right and wrong differ across cultures
---
C1. Thus, there is no objective right and wrong

The conclusion here is NOT necessarily true, even if the premise P1 is true. That means that the argument is not valid. We know it is not valid because it is possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion to be false. To see how, just construct another argument with a similar form (this is called an argument from analogy):

P1. Beliefs about the shape of the Earth differ across cultures
---
C1. Thus, there is no objective right and wrong about the shape of the Earth.

Clearly, this argument is not valid. It is possible for people to disagree about the shape of the Earth, but this does not entail that there is no objective answer about the shape of the Earth. So Pojman reasons that if this is so, and the argument for relativism using just P1 as a premise has the same form, then the claim that people differ about moral beliefs does not entail that there is no objective answer about what is right and wrong.

So Pojman allows for P1 to be true, since it does not harm objectivism about morality.

Clearly, then, the worrisome premise is P2, called the dependency thesis. The dependency thesis is the claim that what is right and wrong is itself relative to culture (this differs from P1 - it is not a claim about beliefs, it is a claim about the nature of right and wrong itself).

Clearly P2 entails relativism about morality. If P2 is true, then C1 cannot be false.

Pojman recognizes, however, that P2 - the dependency thesis - has two forms, what he calls
'weak' and 'strong' dependency. Before he attacks P2 he must be sure that he is attacking the right version of P2. Here are the two forms:

Weak dependence: expressions of a moral belief X can differ across culture
Strong dependence: the moral belief X itself can differ across culture

Here's an example. In America and in Europe we share the belief that one ought to be polite to strangers. Let's call this belief X. Now this does not mean that the way in which politeness is expressed in America and in Europe is the same. As a matter of fact, they differ. In Europe, politeness to a stranger might mean kissing the stranger on both cheeks. In America, this would be disturbing. Rather, a handshake would be polite, one which would be rude in Europe. From this we can ascertain that the right way to express politeness is relative to the country you are in.

Does moral objectivism need to be worried about 'weak' dependency? No. It can be true that moral belief X (politeness in this case) is objective and not relative to culture, even if the ways in which politeness is 'rightly' expressed is relative to culture.

What about strong dependence? This is the form of P2 Pojman wants to attack. It says not just that the ways in which moral beliefs are expressed is relative to culture, but that the moral beliefs themselves are relative to culture.

IV. The Case Against P2 or the Strong Dependency Thesis

The Strong Dependency Thesis is used by two camps of relativism to support why their positions are right. The two camps are

Subjectivism: morality is dependent on individuals, not culture
Conventionalism: morality is dependent on culture

If Pojman's argument against P2 is going to work, then it will have to turn out that both subjectivism and conventionalism are false. If they are both false, then P2 does not lead to any true theories (and thus P2 must be false). If either of the two is not false, then it will turn out that the strong dependency thesis could in fact be true, since it does lead to a theory that could be true.

So Pojman must attacks both camps and show that they cannot work.

The Argument Against Subjectivism

Pojman's Objection: The purpose of morality is to settle interpersonal conflicts. By definition, however, a subjectivist does not share a moral language with another person.
Moreover, as we see in chapter 3 of Rachels, subjectivism states that moral statements are just claims about feelings. And two people cannot be in disagreement about their feelings. Thus subjectivism cannot settle interpersonal conflicts, because no interpersonal conflicts can exist. Since interpersonal conflicts on morality DO exist, and because we DO think morality is used to settle those disputes, subjectivism is false.

Against Conventionalism

Pojman recognizes that he cannot use the same argument that he used against subjectivism and lodge it against conventionalism. The reason is evident: if conventionalism is true, then people do in fact share moral language. So they can in fact settle interpersonal conflicts. So Pojman needs a different argument.

Pojman's Objection: Conventionalism entails tolerance. If so, then relativism entails at least one objective moral value (tolerance). If so, then relativism is not true for all moral values.

According to Pojman, these arguments level subjectivism and conventionalism to the ground. If so, then they are both false. If so, then the strong dependency thesis is false. If so, then the original argument does not entail that the conclusion (that objectivism is false) is necessarily true.

Stage One is thus complete: it is possible that the statement 'objectivism is false' is itself false.

Now to Stage Two: showing that the statement 'objectivism is false' is false.

V. Stage Two: Establishing the Truth of Moral Objectivism

Pojman's argument for moral objectivism requires reducing morality to biology. What this means is this: Pojman thinks that there are certain moral rules that are entailed if we, as a species, wish to stay alive and flourish.

Example: if the human species is to survive, then a moral rule would be 'one ought not to kill another'. If it were permissible to kill others, then the chances of species survival would be lower than if it were not permissible.

Here is Pojman's argument:

P1. Objective moral principles are those adherence to which meet the needs and promote the most significant needs of persons.

P2. Some principles are such that adherence to them meets and promotes the significant needs of persons.
C1. Thus, there are some objective moral rules.

Note that Pojman thinks the argument is valid. So if the premises are true, the conclusion cannot be false. If the conclusion in this case (there are some objective moral rules) cannot be false, then it must be true. If so, then the conclusion of the relativist’s argument (which denies objective moral rules) must be false. If so, the Pojman has succeeded in completely dismantling the relativist's argument.