

Surveying Moral Reasoning and Relativism in World Religion Courses: Research Notes

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Abstract

These research notes present the survey results of 25 students from a world religions course. Inquiry focuses on student survey responses to two questions: 1) how we know right from wrong and 2) whether students favor a universal or culturally relative morality. Students were surveyed on the first question at the beginning and end of the semester. The types of responses given and how they changed over the course of study is analyzed along with the results of the second question. The results show students favored more active forms of finding out right from wrong towards the end of the semester, largely positioning themselves as the final authority for judging right from wrong. This coincided with an expression of more ambivalence towards being able to know right from wrong. By a large majority, students also expressed that moral standards should vary by culture and not be applied universally. Some brief analysis and comments are given on these results and their relevance for further research and consideration in curriculum formation.

本研究ノートでは、世界の宗教コースを受講した25人の学生の調査結果を、次の二つの質問に対する学生の回答に焦点を当て提示する。1) 私達はどのように善悪を判断するのか。2) 学生は普遍的な道徳、それとも文化的に相対的な道徳のどちらを好むのか。一番の質問に関しては、学期開始時と学期末の両時期に調査を行った。学生の回答の種類と、彼らの回答がコース受講過程でどのように変化したかは、二番目の回答結果と照らし合わせて分析した。結果は、学期末に近づくにつれ、善悪を決める権限は自分にあるという積極的な意見を支持する回答が増えた。同時に、人は善悪を知ること自体可能なのか決めかねるという意見もあった。多くの学生は、道徳基準は普遍的なものではなく、文化によって変化するものだと回答した。本研究ノートの調査結果に対する分析を通して、さらなる研究課題を検討する。また今後のカリキュラム形成についても考慮する。

Key words: religion, moral relativism, morality

キーワード：宗教, 相対的な道徳, 道徳

Study

This study considers feedback of 25 students participating in a content-based EFL course on world religions taught at a private university in Kobe, Japan. Students examined Japanese religions and major religions of the world as well as worldviews such as atheism. The research material draws upon surveys on student worldviews (What is Your Worldview?) given at the beginning and end of the course. The intent of these surveys was to: a) collect data on students' self-reported ideas and expression of their worldviews and b) see if and how those views changed after studying a variety of religions.

As part of a unit on Judaism and the Ten Commandments, students were asked to imagine they were the Jewish deity Yahweh and create their own list of commandments to govern their chosen people. Following the assignment, students were asked to reflect on their lists and how they compared with the original Ten Commandments. These research notes center on responses to two questions from these aforementioned activities. The first comes from the "What is Your Worldview?" survey: "How do we know what is right and wrong?" (hereafter referred to as "KRW"). The second question analyzed was a part of the Ten Commandments Reflection: "Do you think people all over the world should have the same moral laws or is it okay for some cultures to have different morals? Why or why not?" (hereafter referred to as "MR" for Moral Relativism)

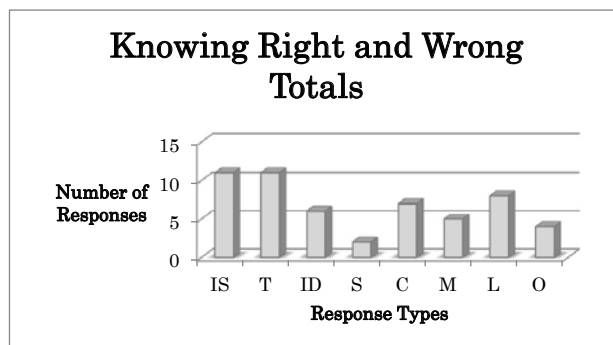
Twenty-five (25) students were surveyed with 23 responding to KRW at the beginning of the semester (KRW1) while 21 students answered at the end of the semester (KRW2) resulting in 44 total answers. A total of 21 students responded to both KRW1 and KRW2 allowing for a comparison of these answers. Seventeen (17) students provided reflections for RW. Students were assigned a letter from A-Y with KRW1 responses designated with the assigned letter followed by number one (e.g. Student A1) and KRW2 responses labeled with the letter and number two (e.g. Student A2). Students' answers appear unedited for spelling or grammar.

Results

Responses to the KRW question were evaluated and grouped into different categories. Using a Grounded Theory approach, these categories were not pre-

determined nor a prior hypothesis applied to them. Instead the aim was for hypotheses to emerge from the data analysis (Silverman, 2013). Answers include “Can’t Know” (C): *“I think we can’t know what is right and wrong. All things depends on how one looks at things, everything can become right and wrong”* (Student Q1). Another occurrence was an expression of Individual Sense (IS) that morality is known naturally and internally: *“I know using my sense”* (Student R1). Individual Decision (ID) expressed the onus on each person to decide what is right and wrong for themselves: *“I think ourself decided what is right and wrong. If I think, it is wrong, it is wrong”* (Student R2). Students responded that right and wrong were decided by the majority in a society or by laws governing the society (M): *“Majority rule”* (Student K2) and *“Many people feel comfortable is right”* (Student G2). Right and wrong was reported as a notion that is taught by others (T): *“I think humans are taught by people and know right and wrong”* (Student V1). Similarly, students emphasized that individuals needed to learn from experience (L): *“To know what is right and wrong, we have to fail many times and make many mistakes. We realize what is right after we learn from mistakes”* (Student I1). Others emphasized the importance of active study required for answering this question (S): *“I learn religion government, economic, moral and many things. People heard many things and chose people think right”* (Student U2). This latter example provides a case where two elements, S and ID were identified. Ten (10) answers contained two or more categories while the remaining 34 were deemed to fit into one category. The final category was “Other” (O), with answers difficult to discern the meaning or not fitting into the above categories: *“Everything is right. But everyone doesn’t have same understanding. So, the Wrong is happening”* (Student H1).

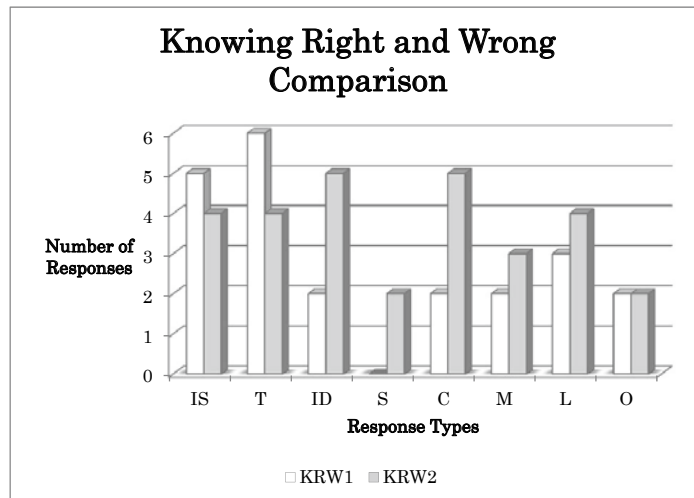
Figure 1. shows the composite results of the surveys, combining KRW1 and KRW2 answers.



IS: Individual Sense T: Taught ID: Individual Decision
 S: Study C: Can’t Know M: Majority/Law
 L: Learned through Experience O: Other

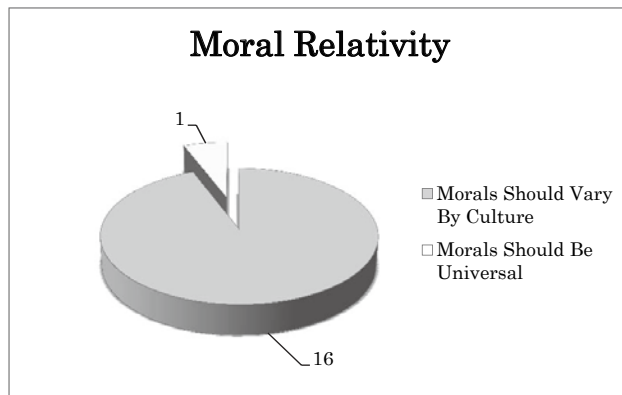
The most prevalent answers, with 11 each, were that right and wrong are known as an Internal Sense (IS) or intuition or something that is Taught (T). These were followed by learning through experience (L), Can't know (C) and Individual Decision (ID).

Figure 2. compares KRW1 and KRW2, showing how student responses varied from the beginning of the semester to the end



There was an increase in ambivalence at the end of the semester as more students expressed that they couldn't know right and wrong (C). Other answers seeing an increase include Individual Decision, Study and Learning through Experience. Putting these categories together would suggest students expressed an increased sense of individual responsibility and empowerment to investigate right and wrong for themselves. Similarly, IS, M, T and L could constitute a more passive approach to knowing right and wrong. These categories experienced an overall decrease of 16 to 11. As students studied and considered different religions and worldviews, their ambivalence increased, coupled with an increased expression of active investigation and individual determination of right and wrong. Only 4 out of 21 students showed no change in the category of their responses. The amount of types of answers increased in KRW2, with 8 students listing reasons in more than one category. Students reported a wider variety of answers and demonstrated changes in the way they responded to the question of right and wrong after completion of the course.

Figure 3.



There were 17 respondents to the question: “Do you think people all over the world should have the same moral laws or is it okay for some cultures to have different morals? Why or why not?” (RW). Figure 3 shows that 16 answered in favor of moral laws differing by culture while only 1 favored the same moral laws for all people. The latter wrote: “*I think people all over the world should have the same moral laws because by unifying, we can reduce or eliminate conflicts due to differences in religion and rules*” (Student E). A reduction of conflict was cited as the student’s reason for supporting a universal moral code.

Conversely, students who supported differing morals suggested enforcing universal morals would be difficult: “*I think there are various people in the world and it is difficult to manage all people. If people all over the world have the same moral, there is the possibility of a rebound. So we should have different morals*” (Student T), and “*No, I don’t. Each region is different from religion, race, culture, thinking. Uniting each value is considered impossible*” (Student C). Others expressed their own reluctance to follow a certain moral standard: “*No. Because if all over the world have the Ten Commandments, we would not keep the Commandments. More over, I thought that doing convet was good action*” (Student K). This student appears to reference the tenth commandment: “You shall not covet...” (Exodus 20:17, New International Version), stating his disagreement with this standard and the inability of others to keep such standards. Student P also uses the Ten Commandments as an example of morality that would cause conflict due to its strict monotheism: “*I disagree that everyone obey the same moral laws and culture. Each people had better follow own country of religion. If Japanese people obey the ten commandments, they cannot call for*

salvation. For most people, they can accept ten commandments of 3-10. However, ten commandments of 1 and 2 are unacceptable for some people.” One student advocated various moralities by hinting that they were affected by differing climates: “I think it is okay for some cultures to have different morals. Because, I think people have to adjust an area and live in the location, so I think weather is another important factor on religion. For long time ago when small group happened, one leader born in many place, hot area or cold area, so I think the bases of thinking is different” (Student H). Only one student supporting moral relativity explored one of its negative implications: “I think it is okay for some cultures to have different morals. Because each people has each thoughts and worship different gods. But I think it isn’t good if there is a god that allow to kill or steal and some people worship him” (Student I). Here she expresses conflicting feelings between allowing cultures to decide their own morals and violations of murder and theft that could occur. She seems to apply a universal standard of morality while advocating freedom from such standards.

Implications

Students of an English content-based course on world religions expressed a range of ideas when asked how they distinguish right from wrong. From the survey results, students showed an increase in expression of pursuing the knowledge of right and wrong and for making such decisions by themselves. An increase in the types of answers offered towards the end of the course show more articulation of a variety of ideas for deciding morality. At the same time, there was an increase in ambivalence, as more respondents communicated that they could not know what was right from wrong definitively. The study of a variety of religions may have contributed to changes in students’ approach to this question as: a) students offered more responses b) a majority changed their responses from the first survey to the second and c) ambivalence accompanying the need for more active forms of learning were expressed in the second survey. The large majority of students favored a cultural or moral relativism although this was not measured to show changes through the world religions course. The lone student (Student E) who favored a universal standard of morality, when asked about knowing right and wrong, answered in both cases for “Individual Sense” (IS): “We know right and wrong by our intuition” (E1) and “People have differences of thinking what is right so we should follow each person’s intuition” (E2). If this student favors

universal moral standards, her two survey responses would indicate otherwise as there could be a high degree of moral relativism among all individuals. A deeper look at the responses reveals additional relativism. There is a heavy emphasis on each individual to decide, study, sense or learn through experience. Majority rule or being taught by others relies on different sources for morality and ones that can change with time or depending on the location. “Can’t Know” indicates there is no universal moral law or it is unknowable even if it exists. This would then put responsibility on individuals to decide the best course in moral dilemmas.

In their study of Japanese college students, Naito and Gielen (1992) sought to measure responses to moral relativity. Their three-pronged definition of moral relativism was:

“a) The basic moral norm(s) varies (vary) with X. The statement emphasizes that judgments vary with X due to a wide variety of situational conditions. b) Moral responses to a situation derive from moral principles, but are inconsistent due to X. c) There is no rational way to judge the adequacy of moral judgments.” (p. 168).

The first component of this definition was seen in responses to the moral relativism question (MR) in this study. Students explained that differences in geography and culture could account for variations in moral norms. The third component was manifest in the “Can’t Know” responses to the KRW question as students admitted a lack of knowable standards for making moral judgments.

Naito and Gielen (1992) constructed several questions to test a range of opinions on moral relativism on a much larger sample of students. One question they called “Cultural Relativity” was posed to students:

There is an opinion that morals and values are different in different cultures, so that even if an act is correct in our society we cannot say that the same act is correct in other societies. Do you agree with this opinion or not?” (p. 168)

Naito and Gielen (1992) reported that 69.8% of their respondents agreed with this statement. This study posed a similar question (MR) with results corresponding to Naito and Gielen where Japanese students favored a form of

moral relativism. Jung (2009) surveyed Japanese college students on Information and Communications Technology (ICT) ethics. Jung (2009) found that students were influenced by relativism in matters of perceiving rightness, fairness or justice of actions. Jung goes on to clarify that students “*chose to engage in unethical behaviors if such behaviors were perceived as culturally acceptable or were widely practiced by their peers or within that society*” (p. 948). Jung’s study underscores the relevance of examining ethical and moral standards in Japanese students. If students were able to relativize judgments on issues such as plagiarism and illegal software use, other moral decisions could be relativized as well.

Further research is needed to determine students’ approach to moral reasoning before courses such as a world religions course as well as how these courses may affect reasoning and decisions in the future. This study showed that student opinions shifted with regard to knowing right and wrong and perhaps provided an opportunity to examine pre-existing beliefs on morality. As students expressed the need for a more active study and individual decisions for morality, there is need for additional study of a variety of moral systems, worldviews and religions in curriculum at the secondary or university level. This would allow students to also explore the deeper implications of different worldviews and moral rationales within their own culture as well as how these systems affect social, spiritual, and political life around the world. If fostering active global and local citizenship is a goal of university education, it is pertinent for students to have the opportunity to examine the foundational level of beliefs, morality, and decision-making.

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Appendix A: Worldview Survey

What is your Worldview? Name _____

1. Can we know what is true? Yes No
2. Is reality material, spiritual or both? Explain.

3. Where do human beings come from? What is a human being?

4. What is the purpose of human life? Why do we exist?

5. How do we know what is right and wrong?

6. What happens to a person when they die?

7. Do God or gods exist? Why or why not?

Appendix B: Ten Commandments Reflection

Global Topics Ten Commandments Reflection

Name _____

If you were absent last class, on the back of this paper, imagine you are Yahweh, the only God who created everything and you've chosen the Jewish people to be your special people. You want them to be good like you. Make a list of ten rules (commandments) that are the most important rules for them to follow on the back of this paper.

Look at your list of commandments and compare them to the Ten Commandments from the reading (taken from the Bible).

1. What laws did you make that were similar to Yahweh's?
2. What laws were different?
3. Which law from the Jewish Ten Commandments seems unusual to you? Why?
4. Do you think people all over the world should have the same moral laws or is it okay for some cultures to have different morals? Why or why not?