

Ethical Relativism

Some facts are objective. Others seem to be subjective.

Objective Facts: True independent of what anyone believes, thinks, feels, etc.

Subjective Facts: Their truth depends on (at least one person's) beliefs, thoughts, feelings, etc.

Brainstorm: Which category do the following statements belong to?

- (1) Carbon atoms have six electrons.
- (2) The Earth orbits the Sun.
- (3) Ice cream is delicious.
- (4) The Mona Lisa is beautiful.
- (5) It is illegal to run a red light.

Now, consider one more:

- (6) Murder is morally wrong.

1. Ethical Relativism: Did you think (6) belongs to the 'subjective' category? If so, you may find the following moral theory plausible:

Ethical Relativism: An action is morally wrong (or right) for someone if and only if that person's culture *believes* it is wrong (or right).

According to the ethical relativist (sometimes called the 'cultural relativist'), we just DECIDE, as a society, which actions are morally wrong (and which are not). And once we do, then those actions ARE morally wrong for everyone in that society. So, morality is a **subjective** matter on this view, since moral truths depends upon what people THINK about morality. On this view, morality is basically a matter of personal taste (or societal taste, etc.).

Some disagree, arguing that moral truths are **objective**; i.e., morality does NOT depend upon what people think. Morality is NOT a matter of taste. Rather, there are some things that are just plain wrong (or right) REGARDLESS OF WHAT ANYONE THINKS.

[*Note: There is a third view; Namely, that there is no such thing as morality at all! This view is called 'ethical nihilism'. I will say more about this below.*]

For example, “**Ice cream is good**” is clearly a **subjective** truth, since it is only true FOR ME because I THINK it is true. “**The Earth orbits the Sun**” on the other hand is an **objective** truth, because it would be true REGARDLESS OF WHAT ANYONE THINKS.

If I say that “Ice cream is good” and you say that “Ice cream is bad”, we can both be right. But, if I say that “The Earth is round” and you say that “The Earth is flat”, we cannot both be right. One of us MUST be mistaken (and, in this example, you are mistaken).

Relativity: Morality is also **relative** on this view. For instance, if one society says cannibalism is morally wrong, while another says it is morally permissible, then the fact of whether or not cannibalism is morally wrong for some person will be a relative one—namely, the answer will depend upon which society that person is a member of.

We will now ask the question: Does some action become right or wrong just because one’s society SAYS it is right or wrong? Or rather, is it the case that there are some moral standards that apply to ALL people in ALL societies, regardless of whether or not those societies believe in those standards? i.e., are there any OBJECTIVE moral truths?

2. The Argument From Disagreement: Why believe that morality is relative? Relativists often say that **widespread moral disagreement** supports this conclusion. They say:

1. Different people have different beliefs about morality.
2. Therefore, there are no objective facts about morality.

Lots of people disagree about moral issues. There are heated debates and bitter arguments between people, and wars between civilizations, over what the morally right and wrong actions are. The relativist’s claim is that this disagreement is an indication that there simply ARE NO OBJECTIVE FACTS OF THE MATTER about morality.

Now, the argument above is not valid. There is a missing premise. What premise might we supply in order to make it valid? Answer: Something like this:

1. Different people have different beliefs about morality.
2. ***Whenever people disagree about something, there is no objective fact about the matter.***
3. Therefore, there are no objective facts about morality.

Objection: But, this argument is obviously unsound, since premise 2 is clearly false. To illustrate, consider the following argument, which is clearly flawed:

1. Different people have different beliefs about the shape of the Earth (some think it is spherical, while others believe it to be flat).
2. Whenever people disagree about something, there is no objective fact about the matter.
3. Therefore, there is no objective fact about the shape of the Earth.

The mere fact that there is disagreement about certain moral issues does not prove that there is no objective FACT of the matter, or that EVERYONE is right.

How much disagreement is there? So, premise 2 is false. But, premise 1 might be false as well! At the very least, there may not be as much moral disagreement in the world as the relativist claims. The relativist will often point to actions that other cultures practice without hesitation or guilt, which seem horribly immoral to us, as proof of the claim that there is clearly disagreement about the principles of morality. But, this is not so obvious. For instance, consider one popular example that the relativist uses to prove their case:

Eskimo infanticide: Eskimos used to regularly practice infanticide (killing infants). Their reason was that, if they did not kill some infants, their tribe as a whole would not survive. Their environment was so harsh that they only had enough food to support a limited number of babies. For instance, if the mother was already feeding one child, she could not produce enough milk to feed a second. If the tribe produced too many females, there would not be enough males to hunt and provide food. Furthermore, they did not understand the nature of procreation and birth control to take the necessary precautions. And so on... So, when an infant was born that threatened the tribe's survival, they killed it.

Clearly, in our culture, we believe that infanticide is a moral atrocity. So, at first, there seems to be a HUGE disagreement between us and the Eskimos regarding infanticide. But, consider the predicament under which the Eskimos did this. If they did NOT do it, their whole society would have died off. They did not kill infants FOR NO REASON. Rather, they only did so when the survival of the whole population depended on it. Thus, it seems that they were really operating under some moral principle such as, "*It is permissible to kill if doing so is required in order to save many lives.*" But, does this principle seem obviously false to you? Most of us would probably ACCEPT this claim. So, perhaps there is not really moral disagreement after all. There are just different CIRCUMSTANCES.

3. Four Undesirable Implications of Ethical Relativism: We have already seen that the primary argument for relativism is flawed. Also, there may not be as much moral disagreement as the relativist claims. In this section we will see that, even if ethical relativism IS correct, then a number of incredibly undesirable outcomes follow:

(1) No condemning of other cultures: If morality were relative to one's culture, there would be no basis for claiming that the practice of any other culture is morally wrong, no matter how atrocious their deeds seemed to us. For instance, if there were a society that practiced cannibalism, there would be no basis for us to condemn their actions. Of course, since OUR society believes cannibalism is morally wrong, it IS morally wrong **for us** (according to relativism). But, so long as the other society APPROVED of cannibalism, it would NOT be morally wrong **for THEM** to kill and eat people. But, this verdict seems mistaken. Shouldn't we rather say that the people of that other culture are MISTAKEN about morality, and that they are doing something morally abhorrent which they MISTAKENLY believe to be morally acceptable?

(Or consider other practices like female genital mutilation—i.e., what Rachels called "[excision](#)"—and [bride-burning](#) and [gendercide](#).¹ Are we really prepared to say, "While those things are wrong HERE in the U.S. because we disapprove of them, there is nothing morally objectionable about them over THERE because the people in those societies approve of such things"? Or, rather, doesn't it seem like such practices would be morally wrong for ANYONE to engage in, and that those who approve of them are simply MISTAKEN?)

(2) No condemning of one's own culture: If ethical relativism were true, one could never criticize their OWN culture's standards. Under relativism, it is impossible for any society to be mistaken about the moral status of any action. Under relativism, we decide morality by majority vote; we simply poll our citizens, and whatever the majority says is permissible IS permissible. Whatever they say is wrong IS wrong—for EVERYONE within that society. So, if the majority of our society says abortion is permissible, then all of those individuals who think that it is morally wrong are simply **mistaken**. In short, if relativism is true, there is no justification for moral disagreement. But this seems false. Morality should not be decided by majority vote. Furthermore, it seems like it IS possible for one's own society to have reached the wrong conclusion about some moral issue.

(3) Moral progress is impossible: According to relativism, there is no such thing as moral progress. In order for PROGRESS to occur, there must be a change for the BETTER. But, in order for something to get "better" there must be some **standard** that is being more closely adhered to over time. [*For instance, to say that you are getting BETTER at playing 'Fur Elise' on the piano entails that there is some fixed standard against which to judge your performance; i.e., some correct way to play.*]

¹ As of 2019, there are over 200 million women and girls in the world who have been subject to excision. ([source](#)) To put that number in perspective, there are only about 168 million women/girls in the entire United States.

But, on relativism, there is no such standard; no fixed moral yardstick against which to measure our changing moral beliefs. So, though our moral views DO change over time, they never get BETTER on relativism. They only get DIFFERENT. In 1800, the majority of our society APPROVED of slavery. So, according to relativism, slavery was PERMISSIBLE in 1800. That is, slave-owners were NOT DOING ANYTHING MORALLY WRONG by owning other human beings as property. That fact alone is already repugnant. But now consider: Today, the majority of our society does NOT approve of slavery. According to relativism, then, slavery is MORALLY WRONG in the present day. Most people would like to say that our moral views today regarding slavery are BETTER now than they were 200 years ago. But, if relativism is true, we cannot make this claim. On relativism, neither the present view nor the 1800 view regarding slavery is morally better than the other. Since, on relativism, a culture is NEVER mistaken about morality, we simply went from one correct belief about slavery in 1800 to a different, but also equally correct view about it today. Our current view is not “better”—it is just **different**.

But that seems false. It seems to most of us that a society’s moral beliefs CAN get better or worse over time—i.e., they can get closer or further from the real truth of the matter about what is right and what is wrong.

- (4) Absurd scenarios: If ethical relativism is true, then we can think of absurd scenarios involving cultures where, if some members of that culture were to perform a wrong action enough times, it would become a *right* action. For instance: Consider a culture where 60% of the people think cannibalism is wrong, while 40% of the people think it is NOT wrong. In that culture, cannibalism is morally wrong, since (on the whole) the majority of the culture does not approve of it. However, now imagine that the pro-cannibalization citizens come up with a plan to change the moral status of cannibalism: They make plans to kill and eat half of the anti-cannibal citizens so that, once enough of the anti-cannibalists are gone, the citizens in favor of cannibalism would then be in the *majority*. In this way, cannibalism would go from being morally WRONG to morally PERMISSIBLE, since then (on the whole) the majority of that culture would now approve of it.

In short, *by repeatedly performing a morally wrong action, the populace could make it **become** a morally **right** action*. But, that is absurd. Any moral theory that allows for such absurdities to be possible must be flawed in some way.

4. Conclusion: It appears that ethical relativism must be false. Morality is not subjective. The moral status of actions like rape or murder are not merely a matter of taste. It is simply not true that things are wrong ONLY because most of us presently disapprove of them, or that they would BECOME permissible if our society suddenly started finding these actions to be acceptable. No, it seems obvious that actions like rape or murder are wrong not just because most of us find them distasteful—but rather because there is some OBJECTIVE moral truth of the matter about the moral status of such actions.

In short, **some things are just plain wrong, regardless of what anyone thinks.**

So, for the rest of this class, we will be explorers. We are on a quest for the objectively correct answers to a number of ethical questions. We will not decide any issue by majority vote. Rather, we will attempt to decide issues by appealing to plausible fundamental objective moral principles. For instance, here's a plausible candidate:

It is morally wrong to cause great harm to another individual for little or no benefit.

It is plausible to think that the following moral truth would be true EVEN IF EVERYONE ON EARTH THOUGHT IT WAS FALSE:

An action is morally acceptable if, on the whole, it *benefits* all those affected by it. And, likewise, an action is morally *unacceptable* if, on the whole, it *harms* all those affected by it.

Isn't it plausible to think that this principle is one that applies to ALL people of ALL cultures of ALL times, and is independent of what people think, believe, desire, etc.? This seems universally and objectively true, regardless of what anyone thinks. If there has ever been an individual, or a society, who thought that it was NOT wrong to cause great harm for little benefit (for example, blowing up an entire city full of people to make room for a new highway), they were simply mistaken.

But, this is something that the relativist must reject (for, if ENOUGH people in our culture thought that this principle was false, it WOULD be!).

Ethical Nihilism

Now, some hold an even more extreme view:

Ethical Nihilism: There is no such thing as morality; i.e., there is no right and wrong, or good and bad.

This view is sometimes called “error theory.” By this, it is meant that, whenever we make statements like, “He is a bad person,” “She did the right thing,” or “Stabbing babies for fun is wrong,” we are simply mistaken. These claims are all false. There simply *are* no such things as right, wrong, good, or bad. (Note that the argument from disagreement is also used by nihilists, but to reach an even stronger conclusion.)

Against Nihilism: Note that the ethical nihilist must accept some conclusions that many of us feel *very strongly are not true*. Things like:

- (a) It is not the case that nuclear war would be bad.
- (b) It is never the case that enjoyment is better than excruciating pain.
- (c) It is never the case that stabbing a baby for fun is wrong.

The nihilist would have to accept all of these statements as true. For, they reject that there are any such things as good, bad, (better, worse), right and wrong. But that is extremely counter-intuitive.

But, think about this for a second. Is it *really* the case that there is nothing wrong with, say, sawing a little kid in half? The fact that the child will experience intense pain and suffering, or that you are taking away everything good that this child has—on nihilism these do not count as reasons to NOT saw her in half. For there ARE no such things as moral reasons against any action. According to nihilism, you are merely separating some atoms from some other atoms, and this has no moral significance.

...Is this a bullet that any human being with any empathy at all could bite?

But, Don't We Just THINK, e.g., Infanticide is Wrong Because of Evolution?: Perhaps our strong intuitions about “morals” are merely a byproduct of biological evolution; e.g., the belief that murder is wrong is merely a sentiment which has been biologically selected for not because it is a perception of some “real, moral truth”, but because it is advantageous for survival. For, any species that didn't oppose murder would likely die out quickly. (Another good example is the moral taboo of incest.)

Reply: First, many of our moral beliefs seem to go AGAINST survival of the fittest (e.g., rape is wrong, as is killing the genetically diseased or disabled). Second, objective moral facts seem to be the best explanation for converging global moral consensus (see [here](#)).