

## The Problem of Moral Relativism

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What is **moral relativism**? It is the ideology that there are no absolute right and wrong actions; it's all just a matter of personal perspective. There is no objective good and evil, only matters of personal taste and opinion. Moral right and wrong are relative to a particular culture (cultural relativism) or is relative to the individual (individual relativism). Morality in this view is *subjective* (comes from within a person).

**Moral absolutists** on the other hand are those who think there is really a right and a wrong, regardless of what anyone thinks about it. Rape is really wrong, it doesn't matter what the rapist or his groupies think. Morality in this view is *objective* (a real fact about the world).

**Moral relativism** It is the underlying philosophical assumption in these common trumpet blasts: "That's true for you but not for me", "That's just your truth", "That's just your opinion", "That's just your value judgment", "Don't judge", "What gives you the right to say this action is wrong?", "Who's to say this action is wrong?", "I think this action is wrong, but I don't want to say someone else can't do it", "Different strokes for different folks", "Don't like abortion don't have one", "Don't impose your morality on me!", "Just be true to yourself", "Do your own thing", "Be open-minded", "There's nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so".

On the other hand even small children instinctively know moral absolutes. Hey don't cut in line, that's unfair, etc. Moreover, conscience tells us morals are objective and objective moral values are all around us in public discourse, international human rights organizations, war crimes, international law, UN resolutions, etc.

Which view is correct?

### Four Arguments for Moral Relativism

#### **The Argument from Tolerance, Guilt, and Compassion:**

"Moral absolutes create guilt. Millions have been made to feel bad about their actions and lifestyle because of oppressive people thinking they can tell them what is right and wrong. We should get rid of moral absolutes to be more tolerant and compassionate!"

**Response:** Feelings are not the standard for determining morality. Certainly we wouldn't want a rapist or a Hitler to feel good about their immoral actions.

Secondly, the argument **assumes** things like **tolerance and compassion are really good**. But this is self-refuting. If there are no moral absolutes these values cannot be really good. Why not be intolerant? Only a moral absolutist can take tolerance seriously. What is needed for true tolerance is the recognition that tolerance is a real good and that one ought to live in harmony with those whom they disagree on some relatively minor issues. Now, only an absolutist can have a real moral disagreement with another, for if relativism is true then *there is no wrong opinion to tolerate, every view is equally true*. The relativist just agrees with everyone, and agreeing is not tolerance.

Besides, grave immoral actions are intolerable. Should we tolerate genocide, enslavement, or tyranny? Can we tolerate racism, underpaying women or gay bashing?

#### **The Argument from Differing Cultural Values:**

"Different cultures and societies have different moral values. Individuals do too. Therefore right and wrong are determined by one's culture."

**Response:** There is a hidden false assumption in this argument, that it is good to obey one's culture. Why shouldn't that be relative too? It is self-contradictory to say there are no moral absolutes but that one should follow their culture.

Secondly, it is obvious that entire cultures can morally err. Cultures that enslave others, Nazi Germany, etc.

Thirdly, Even if this objection were correct, the argument is a *non sequitur*. Just because there is disagreement on morality doesn't mean objective morality is nonexistent. It doesn't follow that because there is lack of consensus there is no truth. If it did, then all one would have to do is object to this "consensus requirement" and thereby make it false too.

Finally, upon examination, the real difference between the values of different cultures is often exaggerated. Killing innocent human beings has always been wrong in every culture. What has changed is the *justification* for killing. The cultural differences are superficial, not absolute. No culture has praised cowardice, disrespect towards parents, and rape as morally good, and on the other hand condemned truth telling, love of one's wife, and courageous patriotism as morally bad.

#### **The Argument From Parental or Societal Influence:**

"Morals are the result of upbringing. We would have different values if we were brought up in a different way. Morals are learned traits, not real."

**Response:** The fact that morality is learned does nothing to prove its subjectivity. History and science are learned too, but that doesn't make them relative.

#### **The Argument From Freedom:**

"Everyone should have the freedom to live out their own morality. The Supreme Court ruled 'At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.'" (Planned Parenthood v Casey)

**Response:** This argument presupposes that freedom is already an objective good and that everyone ought to respect it. The relativist cannot consistently hold that there are no real values and that freedom is a real value. Only a moral absolutist can take things like freedom seriously.

#### **Five Arguments Against Moral Relativism**

1. **Relativism is very often self-refuting:** Relativism is almost always offered in a form that commits intellectual suicide. When someone tells you not to impose your morality on others, what are they actually doing? They are imposing their morality on you! They are saying that you shouldn't do something. The person who professes this view thinks it is wrong to impose morality on others, but they can't live by their own rule." You are wrong for telling others they are wrong - you shouldn't tell other people what they shouldn't do". If the relativists are allowed to tell others they are wrong and what they shouldn't do, why can't everyone else? The argument cuts its own throat. Consider these examples:

***"People should just be true to themselves, do their own thing, and be open-minded. You shouldn't condemn others!"***

Notice that the relativist here uses the morally obligatory "should" word twice while at the same time professing that there is no such thing as moral obligation. This statement is saying that we shouldn't morally condemn the actions of others while at the same time it morally condemns one who believes in objective morality.

***"Don't impose your morality on others!"***

But this very command is itself an imposition of morality on a person who believes in objective moral values.

**“Who are you to judge?”**

A rational human being with at least a basic understanding of logic and an intuitional knowledge of basic moral principles. This qualifies me to make moral judgments about individuals and society. Your claim here that I ought not to judge is itself a judgment against me and is therefore self-refuting.

*These objections reveal the hypocrisy of the relativist* – who first says we should not judge others or impose values on others, and then turns right around and judges others for judging and imposes their relativism on those who do not accept it

2. **Relativism is unlivable:** It’s easy sometimes to sit in the ivory tower of the university and pretend relativism to be true, but as soon as these folks go out into the "real world" they act like everyone else. They will get upset if someone cuts in line, steals their car stereo, and if there is a burglar in their house they will call the cops so the police can come and impose their morality on the burglar. If there are no objective moral values then everyone should be let out of prisons and jails because these convicted felons did nothing really wrong.
3. **It is impossible for the relativist to say anything is wrong, including intolerance.** If morals are relative then who are to say that one should not be an intolerant Nazi? Maybe my personal morality says its ok to beat women, or wear a white sheet and burn crosses in my front yard and go around lynching minorities. *Why should the relativist force their idea of tolerance on them?* Is it wrong to torture babies for fun? The relativist must answer "no". If relativism were true, there can be **no immoral societies** and **no immoral laws**. Cultures that enslave others, Nazi Germany, etc. are morally neutral. Relativists cannot be moral reformers for culture. Why change the culture if there is no real standard? What could possibly be the objective moral standard by which a cultural reformer demands change?
4. **It is impossible for the relativist to say anything is right, including tolerance or compassion.** Since relativism rejects absolute moral values then they cannot say anything is truly morally good either. The actions of Hitler and Mother Theresa do not morally differ at all. In the same way, for the moral relativism there can be **no moral improvement**. “Moral progress” can only be an incoherent phrase in the vocabulary of the relativist. If there is no real good, there is no really good goal and so nothing towards which we can “progress”.
5. **Relativism reduces to moral nihilism:** *Moral nihilism* is the view that there are no moral values, period. If relativism is true, then moral nihilism is true. If moral values are personal and individual, then this reduces to everyone should be allowed to do what they want, which is indistinguishable from having no moral standards. Moreover, since our legal system is founded on moral norms, and if it turns out there are no moral norms, then there should be no criminal codes. There is nothing wrong with stealing someone else’s property, from neglecting one’s own children, underpaying and cheating employees, etc. **If relativism is true then everything goes.** There is no difference from being a moral relativist and having no morality at all.

We live in a culture inundated with moral issues and disagreements (euthanasia, gay marriage, abortion, embryonic stem cell research, just wars, etc.) yet our culture is continually telling us the morals are relative and hence there really is no truth to the matter. What a waste of time all of these arguments must be.

**This last argument really narrows it down.** Either there are objective moral standards binding on everyone or there is no morality at all. Traditional morality holds that morals are *prescriptive*, that is, they are not simply *describing* what everyone is doing but authoritatively *prescribing* and governing what they *should* do.

It is indeed worth mentioning that the above are *the main arguments for moral relativism*. It doesn't take much to see that *moral relativism is one of the weakest and most transparent philosophies ever proposed* – yet it is still very widespread in our culture.