

Moral Relativism

Overview on Moral Relativism <https://youtu.be/5RU7M6JSVtk>

Moral relativism is the idea that there is no universal or absolute set of moral principles. It's a version of morality that advocates "to each her own," and those who follow it say, "Who am I to judge?"

It is the position that moral or ethical **propositions** do not reflect objective and/or universal moral truths, but instead make claims relative to social, cultural, historical or personal circumstances. It does not deny outright the truth-value or justification of moral statements (as some forms of Moral Anti-Realism do), but affirms relative forms of them. It may be described by the common aphorism: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do".

Moral Relativists point out that humans are not **omniscient** and history is replete with examples of individuals and societies acting in the name of an **infallible** truth later demonstrated to be more than fallible, so we should be very wary of basing important ethical decisions on a supposed **absolute** claim. Absolutes also tend to inhibit experimentation and foreclose possible fields of inquiry that might lead to progress in many fields, as well as stifling the human spirit and quest for meaning. In addition, the short term proves itself vastly superior in the ethical decision-making process than the relatively unknown long-term.

Relativistic positions may specifically see moral values as applicable only within certain cultural boundaries (**Cultural Relativism**) or in the context of individual preferences (**Ethical Subjectivism**). A related but slightly different concept is that of **Moral Pluralism** (or **Value Pluralism**), the idea that there are several values which may be equally correct and fundamental, and yet in conflict with each other (e.g. the moral life of a nun is incompatible with that of a mother, yet there is no purely rational measure of which is preferable).

An extreme relativist position might suggest that judging the moral or **ethical judgments** or acts of another person or group has no meaning at all, though most relativists propound a more limited version of the theory. Some philosophers maintain that Moral Relativism dissolves into **Emotivism** (the non-cognitivist theory espoused by many Logical Positivists, which holds that ethical sentences serve merely to express emotions and personal attitudes) or **Moral Nihilism** (the theory that, although ethical sentences do represent objective values, they are not verifiable as facts).

Moral Relativism generally stands in contrast to **Moral Absolutism**, **Moral Universalism** and to all types of **Moral Realism**, which maintain the existence of invariant moral facts that can be known and judged, whether through some process of verification or through intuition.

Moral relativism can be understood in several ways.

Descriptive Moral Relativism, also known as cultural relativism, says that moral standards are culturally defined. Indeed, there may be a few values that seem nearly universal, such as honesty and respect, but many differences appear across cultures when people evaluate moral standards around the world. Descriptive Moral Relativism is based on the **empirically** proven, deep and widespread moral disagreements across different societies. However, it accepts the existence of fundamental disagreements about the right course of action, even when the same facts obtain and the same consequences seem likely to arise. Several leading **Existentialists** could be called Descriptive Moral Relativists.

Meta-Ethical Moral Relativism states that there are no objective grounds for preferring the moral values of one culture over another. Societies make their moral choices based on their unique beliefs, customs, and practices. And, in fact, people tend to believe that the "right" moral values are the values that exist in their own culture. Meta-Ethical Moral Relativism holds that the truth or falsity of moral judgments is not absolute or universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions or practices of a particular group or society. It also

holds that many fundamental moral disagreements cannot be rationally resolved (it differs in this way from Descriptive Moral Relativism), and so moral judgments lack the authority or normative force often claimed for them.

Normative Moral Relativism is the idea that all societies should accept each other's differing moral values, given that there are no universal moral principles. Most philosophers disagree however. For example, just because bribery is okay in some cultures doesn't mean that other cultures cannot rightfully condemn it.

History of Moral Relativism

The early Sophist Greek philosopher Protagoras provides an early philosophical precursor to modern Moral Relativism in his assertion that "man is the measure of all things". The Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484 - 420 B.C.) observed that each society typically regards its own belief system and way of doing things as better than all others. Plato also pointed out that much of what is believed to be "fact" is actually "opinion". Even earlier, Indian Jainism espoused as one of its basic principles the that truth and reality are perceived differently from different points of view, and that no single point of view is the complete truth.

In the early Modern era, Baruch Spinoza notably held that nothing is inherently good or evil. The 18th Century Enlightenment philosopher David Hume is often considered the father both of modern Emotivism and of Moral Relativism, although he himself did not claim to be a relativist. He distinguished between matters of fact and matters of value, and suggested that moral judgments consist of the latter because they do not deal with verifiable facts obtained in the world, but only with our sentiments and passions. He famously denied that morality has any objective standard, and suggested that the universe remains indifferent to our preferences and our troubles.

However, Moral Relativism is essentially a 20th Century creation, and the main impetus came from **cultural anthropologists** such as Franz Boas (1858 - 1942), Ruth Benedict (1887 - 1948) and Margaret Mead (1901 - 1978). The Finnish philosopher and anthropologist Edward Westermarck (1862 - 1939) was one of the first to formulate a detailed theory of Moral Relativism. He portrayed all moral ideas as subjective judgments that reflect one's upbringing. He pointed to the obvious differences in beliefs among societies, which he said provided evidence of the lack of any innate, intuitive power and of any universal or absolute beliefs.

Criticisms of Moral Relativism

Some Moral Absolutists criticize Moral Relativism on the grounds that it may lead to immorality, because it abandons an absolute standard of right and wrong. Moral Relativists counter that the inflexibility of Moral Absolutism is just as likely to lead to immoral acts (e.g. the absolute beliefs of medieval Christianity which led to what we now consider atrocities).

Others argue that anyone who claims that no moral absolutes exist undermines their ability to justify their own existence, being unable to argue against the discontinuation of their own lives at the hands of another individual who adheres to a different set of values. However, the Moral Relativist claims just as much moral justification to defend himself as the attacker does to attack.

Similarly, it has been argued that Moral Relativists cannot justify intervening in other cultures' practices, since that would be to impose their own morality, and thereby they may be culpably unwilling to resist evil in some cases.

It is difficult for a Moral Relativist to explain what happens when a society has a collective change of heart (e.g. the rejection of slavery as a morally permissible policy), or when an individual undergoes a personal moral improvement or admits that an attitude they used to hold was wrong. For them, there is no external

standard to judge against so, while their attitudes change, they cannot really be said to improve or decline. Thus, there is a circularity in the process of judging one's values according to one's values.

There are also difficulties in putting a boundary on a "society" or "culture", especially as what people feel to be their social or cultural groupings may well not align with legal and national groupings, and a person holding "minority" moral views within their society or culture may consider their "culture" more aligned with that minority (e.g. religious communities, homosexual cultures) than with the larger state or national society which determines what is lawfully acceptable. Therefore, it is argued, Moral Relativism is meaningless since one could probably find a society that condones whatever one wishes to do (and similarly an individual could adopt different principles at different times), and ultimately any belief is equally as valid as any other.

Some commentators have argued that Moral Relativism is not a positive ethical theory at all, because it is not normative (indicative of how things ought to be), and because it effectively reduces to mere societal law or custom, or to mere personal taste and preference.

Moral Relativism inevitably conflicts with the tenets of absolute morality as taught by almost all world religions. Some Catholics and Buddhists, for example, have attributed the perceived post-war decadence and permissiveness of Europe to the displacement of absolute values by Moral Relativism.

A rather flippant criticism is often levelled at Moral Relativism, that it is logically impossible, because, by saying "all things are relative", one is stating an absolute and therefore a logical contradiction.

Moral Absolutism

<https://youtu.be/y6Z4Pd1OiJA>

Introduction

Moral Absolutism is the ethical belief that there are absolute standards against which moral questions can be judged, and that certain actions are right or wrong, regardless of the context of the act. Thus, actions are inherently moral or immoral, regardless of the beliefs and goals of the individual, society or culture that engages in the actions. It holds that morals are inherent in the laws of the universe, the nature of humanity, the will of God or some other fundamental source. It is a form of deontology.

It is the opposite of Moral Relativism, the position that moral propositions do not reflect objective and/or universal moral truths, but instead make claims relative to social, cultural, historical or personal circumstances. It is related to, but not the same as, Moral Realism (the position that certain acts are objectively right or wrong, independent of human opinion), and to Moral Universalism (the position that there is a universal ethic which applies to all people, regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexuality or other distinguishing feature).

The ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle believed in a kind of Absolutism or Universalism, opposing the Moral Relativism of the Sophists. Immanuel Kant was a prominent promoter of Moral Absolutism, and his formulation of the deontological theory of the Categorical Imperative was essentially absolutist in nature. Moral Absolutism has been favored historically largely because it makes the creation of laws and the upholding of the judicial system much simpler, and manifested itself in outdated concepts such as the Divine Right of Kings.

Many religions have morally absolutist positions, and regard their system of morality as having been set by a deity, and therefore absolute, perfect and unchangeable. Many Christians regard Christian theology as teaching a hierarchy of moral absolutes known as graded absolutism, wherein the case of a conflict between two absolutes, the duty to obey the higher one (God) exempts one from the duty to the lower ones (fellow humans or, still lower, property). Divine Command Theory is an absolutist meta-ethical theory that an act is obligatory if (and only if) it is commanded by God (William of Ockham argued that if God had commanded murder, then murder would indeed have been morally obligatory).

Sometimes, Moral Absolutism can mean the more extreme position that actions are moral or immoral even regardless of the circumstances in which they occur (e.g. lying is always be immoral, even if done to promote some other good, such as to save a life). In this form, it can be contrasted with Consequentialism (in which a morally right action is one that produces a good consequence or outcome, regardless of the intentions).

Criticisms of Moral Absolutism

A primary criticism of Moral Absolutism regards how we come to know what the absolute morals are. For morals to be truly absolute, they would have to have a universally unquestioned source, interpretation and authority, which critics claim is an impossibility.

Another of the more obvious criticisms is the sheer diversity of moral opinions which exists between societies (and even within societies) in the world today, which suggests that there cannot be a single true morality. There will always be strong disagreements about which moral principles are correct and which are incorrect. For example, most people around the world probably accept the idea that we should treat others

as we wish to be treated ourselves. But beyond that, people from different countries likely hold varying views about everything from the morality of abortion and capital punishment to nepotism and bribery.

So, while moral absolutism declares a universal set of moral values, in reality, moral principles vary greatly among nations, cultures, and religions.

A Consequentialist would argue that it cannot be right for a Moral Absolutist to be unprepared to kill one man in order to prevent the deaths of many others, although this would be a rather extreme and dogmatic example of Moral Absolutism.