

What is Ethical Relativism?

Ethical Relativism is the view that moral (or normative) statements are not objectively true, but “true” relative to a particular individual or society that happens to hold the belief.

In saying that moral beliefs are relative, we mean that they are a function of, or dependent on, what those individuals or societies do, in fact, believe.

Put negatively, according to E.R., there are no objective moral values, no objective right or wrong, and no universally valid moral claims independent of what a subject happens to believe.

Hence, there are no objective and universal norms against which we might measure our subjective beliefs about morality. There is no moral knowledge. The opposite view- right and wrong is objective and universal – is often called non relativism, or Ethical Objectivism.

Two versions of Ethical Relativism

Individual or Personal Ethical Relativism: ethical statements are relative to the individual.

I have my ethical views and you have yours, neither my views nor your views are better or more correct. In a sense we are all equally correct, insofar as whatever we believe is true, or looked at differently, the idea of being more or less correct doesn't apply to moral beliefs, since that would assume that there is some objective standard of right or wrong, independent of what I might believe which would serve as a standard of judgment, but that is exactly what relativism denies.

This is sometimes called ethical subjectivism.

Social or Cultural Ethical Relativism: ethical statements are relative to a given society.

Although societies may differ or disagree as to what is right or wrong, for an individual to decide what is right or wrong, one must simply look to the norms of the society in which they live.

Right and wrong simply IS what a given society says it is. And although a society may believe that its views are the correct ones, cultural ethical relativism insists that no society's views are better or more moral than any other society's beliefs. For the same reason stated above, there is no objective standard independent of what a society actually believes against which its views might be evaluated. An operational definition of Ethical Relativism: Whenever two people or two societies disagree about the morality of an act (i.e., hold different and opposing views), both sides are equally correct.

Four Reasons (Arguments) for Ethical Relativism

1. The Diversity of Moral Views

For: The actual fact that People and Societies have and continue to disagree about the moral issues, they continue to hold different moral beliefs.

For a Relativist, this fact is best explained by and is therefore evidence for E.R.; otherwise we would expect to find considerable moral agreement. (See Ruth Benedict).

In sum: The fact of disagreement and differences in moral beliefs is evidence for the claim that there are no objective moral truths, only subjective moral beliefs.

2. Moral Uncertainty

For: Despite our best efforts, we are often uncertain about what is the right thing to do, especially in the context of a dilemma, our judgment seems to be very subjective, a matter of personal opinion. There seems to be no decisive way to settle many moral disputes, in contrast with factual disputes. Relativism based on epistemic uncertainty and/or skepticism.

In sum, the fact that I do not know for certain in a given situation what is right implies that there is no objective standard; hence morality is relative and subjective.

3. Situational Differences

For: The actual situation in which people live are often very different, it is implausible to believe that there could be one set of moral principles or rules that are universally true for all persons at all times.

In sum, given the many differences in particular circumstances, what we all morality must be relative to the particular situation and no objective or universally valid moral norms exist.

4. Toleration of Differences

For: People from different cultures have different moral beliefs, one ought to tolerate, i.e., not be critical of, these beliefs. One ought not to think that one view is better or more correct than another, hence one should adopt ethical relativism, which entails that all moral beliefs are equally correct.

In sum, Ethical Relativism promotes Tolerance for differences and/or Tolerance is consistent with ethical relativism.

Against the aforementioned Arguments for Ethical Relativism

1. The Diversity of Moral Views Argument

1. If people disagree about some claim, then that claim is subjective and relative.

2. People disagree about moral claims.

3. Therefore, moral claims are subjective & relative, i.e., E.R. is true (both side sides are equally correct).

2nd premise: True or False?

Is there real moral disagreement?

1st premise: If people disagree about X then X is subjective and relative, both sides are equally correct. True or False?

Against: The fact of disagreement can prove nothing about the matter in dispute. This is certainly the case in factual matters. Disagreement does not entail that the matter is wholly subjective, no matter how much disagreement there is.

2. Moral Uncertainty Argument

Against: Uncertainty, even not knowing, does not prove there is nothing to know.

In a complex moral situation, I may be uncertain about what is the right thing to do. I may indeed have to simply act according to my conscience, i.e., what I believe to be right. But this does not prove that morality is wholly a matter of mere belief. That would be like saying; since I do not

know with certainty the correct answer to this problem there is no correct answer (the fallacy of appeal to ignorance). The best I can say is that I do not know the answer, not that there is no answer.

Granted, such situations may lead to Skepticism (I doubt that I can know with certainty that x is true), but skepticism is not equivalent to, nor does it necessarily imply, relativism. Relativism assumes that I know something very significant about moral claims, i.e., that they are all subjective and relative and that there are no objective norms.

But one cannot draw a positive conclusion (about the nature of morality) from a negative premise. At best, relativism is a possibility.

3. Situational Differences Argument

Situational differences seem to make objectivity, in terms of a common or universal morality impossible. A Relativist insists that moral norms cannot be objective universally true, because circumstances vary too much. For example, a Relativist might insist that given diverse circumstances, the judgment that “lying is always wrong” cannot be absolutely true. For instance, lying might be right in order to save a life.

Against: This argument confuses Objectivism with ABSOLUTISM

Absolutism: one set of absolute moral rules that apply in all places and at all times;

Objectivism: some moral claims are objective and universal, but particular moral rules may vary.

The Objectivist agrees that Absolutism is too simplistic, that is, that one can know absolutely the truth or falsity of every moral statement, but insists that moral differences can be explained objectively by a comprehensive moral theory, which will explain why certain goods may take precedence over other goods, when they conflict. Hence, moral conflicts and situational differences do not lead to the conclusion that all norms are subjective and relative.

4. Toleration of Differences Argument

Indeed, much of contemporary relativism is not the result of a logical argument but is a function of allegiance to a value Tolerance.

Against: This position is contradictory. I might adopt tolerance as a moral value, but if relativism is correct, then tolerance is only one value among many. Since no value is more correct than another, I could just as easily adopt dogmatism as my overriding moral belief. Moreover, if relativism is true, why should I even bother to listen to another person’s moral beliefs, since by definition their beliefs cannot be better or more correct than my own beliefs? (See Bernard Williams). Oddly enough, an ethical objectivist, who is not a dogmatist, might insist that tolerance is an objective value and trans-cultural, in that by being open to the beliefs of others I am more likely to come closer to the truth about morality.

Finally, Relativism in itself, if we assume for the sake of argument that it is true, leads to a kind of moral subjectivism with conclusions that most of us believe are false, or at least counter-intuitive.

Individual E.R.: “X is moral” = “I believe (or like) X” -----> pure subjectively

- a. Cannot talk about actions at all, only states of mind.
- b. Can never be mistaken about the morality of an action
- c. Can change the morality of an action by changing my mind
- d. Can never be any real moral disagreements

Social E. R.: "X is moral" = My Society believes (or likes) X"

All of the above implications, as well as a new implication: If this is true than I cannot legitimately disagree with my own society.

All that I have argued thus far is not that Relativism is necessarily false, only that the arguments typically advanced to defend or justify Relativism are very weak, especially if one values logic and giving reasons for holding a position