

Moral Objectivism and Ethical Relativism

Speaker: David Massey

Are there moral principles that apply to everyone or do moral ideas just represent the opinions and preferences of individuals or cultures? The theories of *moral objectivism* and *ethical relativism* each represent different answers to this question.

Moral Objectivism

Moral Objectivism holds that there *are* objective, universal moral principles that are valid for all people.

Louis Pojman proposes one such moral principle that he believes is binding upon all human beings:

“It is morally wrong to torture people just for the fun of it.”¹

Take a moment to carefully consider the entire statement. Is there any circumstance in which you could imagine it being morally acceptable for you or anyone else to violate this principle?

Pojman uses this particular principle as an example, because most people instinctively agree with it. It’s difficult to argue that this principle isn’t binding upon all individuals and cultures. And the existence of even one such principle is enough to demonstrate that moral objectivism is correct.

That said, if we accept that objective moral principles exist, *how* do we determine what those moral principles are? Keep in mind that these are principles that apply to everyone, everywhere.

This is a difficult question, and it’s the focus of many of the major ethical theories or models that we will discuss as we move forward in this course, including Ethical Egoism, Utilitarianism, and Kantianism.

Pojman proposes a number of other moral principles to consider including on our list, such as:²

1. Do not kill innocent people.
2. Do not cause unnecessary pain or suffering.
3. Do not lie or deceive.
4. Do not steal or cheat.
5. Keep your promises and honor your contracts.
6. Do not deprive another person of his or her freedom.
7. Do justice, treating people as they deserve to be treated.
8. Help other people, especially when the cost is minimal.

¹ Pojman, Louis P. *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 7th Edition: Wadsworth, 2011, 39.

² *Ibid.*, 39-40.

One thing that each of these principles has in common is that they all contribute to the development and function of a healthy society. In other words, a society that does not typically follow these moral principles will not survive for long.

Notice that these principles are very general, rather than specific. Principles are intended to *guide*. How they're applied to specific circumstances is determined by the individual or group applying them.

Moral Absolutism and Ethical Situationalism

It's important to distinguish *moral objectivism* from *moral absolutism*, as these are often confused.

While moral objectivism holds that there are universal, objective moral principles, moral absolutism takes this one step further.

Moral Absolutism holds that objective moral principles are exceptionless and nonoverrideable.

For example, a moral absolutist might hold that one should never lie or deceive. If faced with a situation where a murderer will kill an innocent person, unless you lie about the person's whereabouts, the moral *absolutist* would insist that you tell the truth.

A *moderate* moral objectivist, on the other hand, might weigh two or three objective moral principles that are relevant to the situation – such as, (1) do not lie or deceive, (2) protect innocent human life, or (3) avoid unnecessary harm – and conclude that the second and third ones take priority over the first in this situation. This is an example of *ethical situationalism*.

Ethical Situationalism holds that objective moral principles are to be applied differently depending on the circumstances.

Notice that this does not mean that we arbitrarily disregard a moral principle just because it may be inconvenient to follow in a given situation. Instead, it means we weigh it against other relevant moral principles to see if one or the other has greater priority in that circumstance. So, an objective moral principle can be overridden only by another objective moral principle, if appropriate.

On a side note: Don't confuse *moral objectivism* with *Objectivism*. Objectivism is an ethical theory proposed by Ayn Rand which is related to Ethical Egoism, a theory we will discuss later in the course.

Ethical Relativism

Ethical Relativism holds that there are no objective, universal moral principles that are valid for all people. There are two main forms of ethical relativism: *cultural relativism* and *ethical subjectivism*.

In short, ethical relativists believe that moral ideas are only a matter of societal norms or personal opinion, and are not binding upon others.

Cultural Relativism (sometimes known as "conventional ethical relativism") holds that all moral principles are justified only by their cultural acceptance, and are not binding upon other cultures.

Ethical Subjectivism holds that all moral principles are justified only by the individual, and do not necessarily apply to people other than the individual who accepts them.

So, the two theories are basically the same, and differ mainly in regard to their scope. One is restricted to the individual, while the other is restricted to a larger culture or society.

The ethical relativist looks at the differences of opinion among people and cultures regarding how to approach ethics, including how to identify objective moral principles, and concludes that because there is diversity, and even uncertainty, among moral views, and differing moral situations, that there is no objective right and wrong.

The statement, "What is right for you may *not* be right for me" is an example of ethical relativism, more specifically *ethical subjectivism*.

Ethical Nihilism holds that there are no valid moral principles – that morality is a complete fiction.

Be careful not to confuse ethical *relativism* with ethical *nihilism*. While ethical relativism holds that there are no *universal* or *objective* moral principles that apply to everyone, and that moral principles vary based on individual or cultural preference, ethical nihilism holds that there are *no valid moral principles at all* – effectively, that morality does not exist. These are not the same.

Judith Boss considers ethical relativism to be among the weakest moral theories, as do many other moral philosophers.³ Why is this the case?

1. To argue regarding any topic that there is no objective truth, simply because there are differences of opinion, does not make logical sense. People often disagree on facts for a variety of reasons. People can form incorrect conclusions because they don't have all the relevant information. They may also not have the necessary skills to logically think through an issue. For example, Stuart may argue that $2+2=5$. He may sincerely believe this and argue with great passion. Janet may feel equally strongly that $2+2=3$. There is a difference of opinion. Nevertheless, there is an objective answer to the question. As you know, $2+2=4$, and this truth applies to both Stuart and Janet, even if neither of them recognizes it. Not all opinions are equally valid, and differences of opinion do not prove that there is no objective truth.
2. Here we've shown that moral diversity cannot disprove the existence of universal, objective moral principles. However, we can go even further. The degree of moral diversity around the world is not as significant as some might claim. For example, one would be hard pressed to find a society that does not have a concept of murder – or killing without a just cause. While there are some differences in how principles are applied, there are enough moral principles held in common to seriously question the idea that there is no moral commonality.⁴

³ Boss, Judith *Perspectives on Ethics*, 2nd Edition: McGraw-Hill, 2003, 29.

⁴ Pojman, 24-25.

3. How do we define a “culture” or “society” when it comes to ethics? A nation is a society, but so are local communities within that nation, organizations within those communities, and even individual families. These societies can all have different moral values, although an individual can be a member of all of them. How can people determine what is morally right when the moral values of one culture of which they are members conflict with those of another of which they are members? In one of their societies, the person is considered morally wrong, while, at the same time, being considered morally right in another. Further, such a system would not allow for the existence of reformers, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. because in speaking out against the moral principles held by his culture at that time, his actions would be considered morally wrong by a cultural relativist. In contrast, most people value the work that various reformers have done in Western society.
4. Cultural relativism requires that those in one culture cannot criticize the moral actions of those in another culture, because moral principles only apply to the culture in which they are accepted. This creates an impractical situation in the real world. For example, Nation A may believe it is morally wrong to initiate an unprovoked attack on another nation. On the other hand, Nation B may not share that belief. Nation B has nuclear weapons, and decides to use them on Nation A. According to cultural relativism, Nation A cannot judge Nation B. Looking to modern history, consider the actions of Hitler and Germany during World War II, specifically the systematic killing of millions of Jewish people. Cultural relativism would require that other nations not interfere with or judge the moral actions of another nation, even in situations such as that. The moral sensibilities of most people cause them to instinctively reject that idea, which brings the entire theory into question.
5. This same problem applies to *ethical subjectivism* at the individual level. If you argue that all moral principles are relative to the individual, then you cannot judge the moral actions of others. If someone harms you in some way that violates your own moral principles, you can't act against them, because they may not share those principles. Obviously, few people could actually live out that ethical standard. It's easy to say, “You can't judge me,” but it's much more difficult to not judge others, especially when they act in a way that you feel violates your rights. It's easy to see that on an even larger scale ethical subjectivism would create chaos in a society if consistently lived out.

Conclusion

While ethical relativism is popular and many students are drawn to it as a means to avoid having their views examined and criticized by others, the reality is that it simply is not a functional ethical theory that works in the real world.

This brings us back to the challenge of moral objectivism that we mentioned earlier. Even if we accept the existence of universal, objective moral principles, we still have to determine what those moral principles are. That will be our focus for the rest of the course.