

MORALITY AND RELIGION

(Guided notes)

I don't believe in God, but I'm a good person. I believe in right and wrong.

If there is no God, I cannot see the point of trying to be good. If no-one's watching, do whatever you like and don't get caught.

Personally, I don't believe in God, but I want my children to learn right from wrong so I send them to Catholic schools.

Morality is the product of religious belief, and so cannot be separated from it.

The statements above express certain common stances on whether morality and religion have a relationship.

1 Morality does not need religion

2 Morality is pointless without sincere religious belief, since it is the product of religious belief

3 Morality needs religion not because it's true, but because of its power to create 'useful' moral values, particularly in the young

1 'Morality does not need religion' – a simple critique of this view

Supporting points	Opposing points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • religion is apparently the cause of much conflict on personal, communal and national levels • moral behaviour naturally arises when people live in societies and begin to recognise mutual rights and duties • Many people who don't profess to be religious still feel a strong sense of moral obligation • People can have as the basis for their morals a simple human sympathy and empathy with others – why hold to a bunch of religious beliefs? • Religious people 'do God's will'. Is that the same as behaving morally? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • religion is the lynchpin of objective moral values • Judeo-Christian values transformed ancient societies and now lie at the heart of Western judicial and social systems • the antithesis to religious belief is relativism – what kind of morality does relativism yield?

Moral Relativism – a viable alternative to Religion-based ethics?

Some Definitions

(Epistemological) Relativism

Relativism, in all its various shades, basically holds that truths and convictions are not universal. They are relative to people, times and cultures. And since people can't escape their own subjectivity, culture and time, they can only speak of 'how they see things'. Relativists don't believe in truth with a capital T. There's my truth and your truth – but there's no absolute Truth.

- Religion gives us 'truths' not Truth.
- These 'truths' are local to the people, time and culture that expressed them; they are not universal. They do not and cannot hold for all time.

Question

You could argue that E. Relativism does accept at least one universal truth – Truth with a capital T. What?

(Moral) Relativism

Epistemological Relativism leads directly to *Moral* Relativism.

Once you say that religious beliefs are only 'true for' the believers who express them, then what happens when some of these beliefs are about moral behaviour?

Answer: you will not accept these moral rules and universally binding. You will say: 'it's just your view/opinion' when a believer states that 'X is wrong or right'.

Many people, whether they know it or not, are moral relativists. The statement below, a view commonly expressed, is essentially in tune with moral relativism:

'No-one can tell you what's right and wrong: you've just got to make your own mind up and do what's right for you.'

'Some say that X is wrong but I feel we've moved on in our thinking. After all these are the nineties, two-thousands, ...'

Moral Relativism may be discussed on a *cultural* level or on a *personal* level.



Anyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

An interesting idea from a Palestinian preacher. Very obviously he's steeped in Hebrew customs and ideas, using such notions as 'sin' – an idea relevant to his culture, but not to ours.

It is indisputable that some values vary from culture to culture, such as wearing clothes, child marriages, and eating the bodies of dead relatives. Although many of these values are more like rules of etiquette than rules of morality, it is clear that at least some important moral values vary from culture to culture. For example, in Mainland China, abortion is recognized as an important tool for population control. In the Republic of Ireland, though, abortions are not readily available even when the life of a mother is at risk.

Critics of moral relativism sometimes challenge the idea of cultural variation, defined above. For example in *Elements of Moral Philosophy* James Rachels attacks moral relativism arguing that there is in fact a core set of values that are common to all societies and are in fact necessary for any society to exist. These values are (1) we should care for children, (2) we should tell the truth, and (3) we should not murder. Critics also point out problems of consistency with moral relativism. For example, if moral relativism is true, then we could no longer say that customs of other societies such as slavery are morally inferior to our own.

An analysis of Cultural Moral Relativism

- Observed fact: different cultures have different moral codes
 - different things are taboo or obligatory
 - among the Greeks
 - morally obliged to burn corpses
 - morally forbidden to eat them
 - among the Callatians
 - morally obliged to eat corpses
 - morally forbidden to burn them
- Relativist Conclusion drawn from facts like these
 - There is no universal morality -- no morality per se; rather just
 - Ancient Greek morality
 - Callatian morality
 - traditional Eskimo morality
 - 'X is good' is an incomplete expression meaning 'X is good in culture Y'.
- The Argument
 1. Different cultures have different moral codes
 2. So, there is no *objective* right or wrong, no objective good or evil

Criticism: the argument is unsound: conclusion doesn't follow from the factual premise

1. Ancients believed the earth was flat & we believe it's spherical or "round".
 2. Therefore, the earth has no objective shape.
 1. flat for the ancients
 2. round for us
 3. but the earth is really round -- the ancients were just wrong
- In general it does not follow from the fact of disagreement that there is no fact of the matter being disagreed about.

The Consequences of Taking Cultural Relativism Seriously

- **Reductio ad absurdum** argument

Absurdities following from the assumption of CR

- We could no longer say that the customs of other societies are morally inferior to our own: criticism (or praise) of another culture's practices could never be warranted
 - e.g. the treatment of women/children in some parts of the world
 - e.g. the practice of enforced female circumcision in certain parts of Africa
- We could decide whether actions are right or wrong just by consulting the standards of our society.
 - a. e.g., the abolitionists were wrong to condemn slavery as immoral since - according to the standards of their antebellum culture -- there was nothing wrong with it.
 - would-be moral reformers are automatically mistaken: every society would of necessity be morally perfect
 - morality is whatever a culture believes it to be
 - so a culture's moral beliefs could never fail to correspond to what's really moral (since the cultures believing it so makes it so)
 - possibility of moral progress called into doubt: How can you improve on perfection?

Why there is less disagreement than it seems

- Many seeming differences are merely surface differences
- Example
 - both Callatians and Greeks acknowledged obligation to honour their dead
 - Callatians by eating them
 - Greeks by cremating them
 - But "honour thy dead" is a value they share

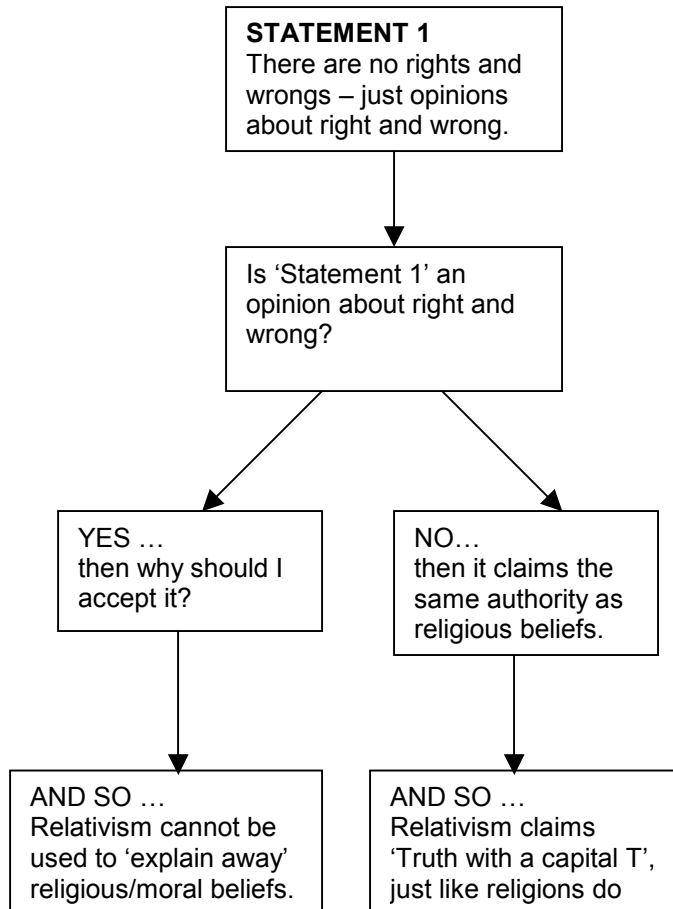
How All Cultures Have Some Values in Common

- Values necessary for survival of a culture, presumably
 - For example, the philosopher James Rachels claims these as universal values:
 - caring for their young
 - truth telling
 - prohibition of murder
- C.S. Lewis, in his famous book *'The Abolition of Man'* asserted that there was a common strand of moral values across many cultures

Moral Relativism expressed on a more personal level

Question

Read the imaginary conversation of the right.
 What deep philosophical weakness does it reveal in Moral Relativism?



I So is nothing really right or wrong - it's all just your opinion?
 J Yes.
 I So if I say adultery is wrong or abortion is wrong - it's just an opinion?
 J Yes, it's just your opinion. I don't have to believe it.
 I What about shoplifting, fare-dodging, swearing, perjury, gossip, vandalism?
 J Just your opinion.
 I What about abusing the environment?
 J I personally believe that *is* wrong.
 I But it's just your opinion?
 J Yes, but most people agree with me.
 I What about child abuse or beating up the elderly and robbing them? Are these really wrong or just my opinion?
 J Well, in my opinion, these are very wrong.
 I But someone like you believes it's just an opinion that these things are wrong. Others can accept or reject the opinion.
 I Yes, but the law would stop such people from abusing children or mugging the elderly.
 J So the law obviously thinks some things are right and other things wrong?
 I Yes, I suppose so, but laws change.
 J Do you really believe that there's no such thing as true right or wrong?
 I I believe statements about right and wrong are just personal views - it's just your opinion.
 J Then the statement 'it's just your opinion' is just an opinion I can accept or reject?
 I I suppose so.
 J I reject it, then.

Some attractions and dangers in Moral Relativism

Having read, discussed and considered the implications of Relativism, particularly Moral Relativism, what would you consider to be its main attractions and dangers?

attractions	dangers

List some values that you think people in Britain

should all accept as binding.

should be free to disagree about.

Return to superstition?

It might be argued that Relativism lets superstition back in. It is not commonly known that monotheistic faith (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) were historically *the* enemy of superstition. Monotheistic faith is the mother of reason and scientific enquiry, since it clears away the clutter of superstition and opens the way for a spirit of wonder and enquiry about the universe.

The writer and commentator, G.K. Chesterton said something like: *'When people stop believing in God, they don't just believe in nothing; they believe in anything.'*

What do you think he means?

Moral Relativism – anything goes?

Another line of criticism against Moral Relativism is that it literally could be invoked to justify any behaviour or practice as morally acceptable. What remains, if anything goes?

Moral Relativists might reply:

- Although we reject universally binding rules, we still see the need for codes of conduct in a healthy society.
- These codes of conduct could be based on simple human reasoning – e.g. don't hurt others, don't infringe on their rights, equal justice for all, etc.

But critics could still go further:

- How will you secure agreement about a basic code of conduct when there might be many variations? Whose code will win out?
- How will you deal with the attitude which says, 'Other people should follow the code, but if it suits me, and if I can get away with it, then I won't'?

You neglect the metaphysical foundations of values. Value notions like justice, equality and concern for the weakest in society were not decided by a committee meeting. They arose in the context of religious belief and religious cultures – pre-eminently, the religious culture of the Hebrews.