

Relativism

Some Definitions

Ethics: The philosophical inquiry into right and wrong and valuation through critical examination of human practices.

Ethical universal: An ethical truth that is true at all times and places.

Ethnocentrism: Judging other cultures on the basis of your own cultural practices

Cultural Relativism: The idea that ethical knowledge is relative to one's culture - the rejection of ethical universals

Subjectivism - The idea that ethical knowledge is relative to the self - the rejection of ethical universals and cultural standards of right and wrong.

Soft relativism (Taylor) - The application of the logic of cultural relativism to groups and individuals within the same culture.

Liberalism of neutrality (Taylor) - Related to soft relativism - the idea that in a liberal democratic society (like ours), people should not judge the life choices of other people

The Basic Assumptions of Cultural Relativism

In your groups assess the strength of each statement on a scale of 1-10 (10 is strongest). Explain the reasons behind your ranking and provide examples to support your assessment. Be prepared to discuss.

1. Different societies have different moral codes
2. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal moral code better than another
3. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is simply one among many
4. There is no “universal truth” in ethics - there are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times
5. The moral code of a society determines what is right and wrong within that society. If the moral code of a society says a certain action is right, then that action is right within that society.
6. It is arrogance for us to try to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures

For tomorrow . . .

In your groups, identify an example of a cultural practice (either in our culture or outside of it) that you find difficult to tolerate. Find a short article about this issue and be prepared to share it with the class in a discussion of whether this issue demonstrates that cultural relativism is wrong.

Example: Female genital mutilation

The cultural differences argument

In your groups, using Rachels, explain the cultural differences argument for ethical relativism.

The Cultural differences argument:

1. Different cultures have different moral codes
2. Therefore (on the basis of these differences) there is no objective or universal ethical truth.

In your groups, assess the strengths and weaknesses of this argument.

Rachels argues that the conclusion does not follow from the premise. Imagine the following. I believe that $2+2 = 5$. Surya believes that $2+2 = 3$ and Samantha believes $2+2 = 10$. Does this mean there is no objective truth to mathematics?

The cultural differences argument proves that cultures differ on moral standards, not that objective principles do not exist.

Weaknesses and consequences of Cultural Relativism

In your groups, using Rachels, discuss the consequences of cultural relativism. In your groups list and discuss at least two.

1. Everything “is” different and nothing is “wrong.” The ability to judge cultural practices as unethical is lost. This means abhorrent practices cannot be condemned.
2. What if our society’s ethical standards were deeply flawed? (slavery, treatment of women, consumerism as examples) Wouldn’t this mean that our moral code was not only flawed but also beyond rational criticism?
3. Would those who disagree with their culture be ethically wrong? What about cultural critics like Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr.? Is cultural reform unethical?
4. The paradox of tolerance.
 1. There are no objective ethical standards
 2. Because of this, it is wrong to judge other cultures, we must adopt a position of tolerance
 3. But in this sense, tolerance becomes a universal ethical standard.
 4. This contradicts the basis assumption of relativism given in 1
5. Acceptance of the logic of cultural relativism is a slippery slope to subjectivism

Ethical subjectivism

- Definition
- Problems
 - Subjectivism fails to provide a means of resolving conflict
 - The individual becomes morally infallible
 - Rational argument about ethical positions becomes impossible
 - This all but guarantees an atomized and fragmented society

Subjectivism maintains that no ethical proposition is objectively true for all people.

Objectively true = A proposition that is true independently of anyone thinking that it is

In ToK terms, subjectivism maintains either that there is no such thing as an ethical big T truth, or, that such knowledge is impossible for humans to attain.

Normative subjectivism - An act is ethically right, if and only if, the person judging the act approves of it (Shafer-Landau 555). Right and wrong are determined at the level of the individual.

Weaknesses and consequences of Cultural Relativism

5. Cultural relativism fails to provide a means by which conflicting positions can be reconciled. This is ultimately the goal of any ethical system.

6. Cultural relativists overstate the lack of agreement on basic moral principles. Cultures disagree over practices and not principles. What examples does Rachels provide of values that are common across cultures? Can you think of others?

The Lessons of Cultural relativism

1. It is easy to mistake your culture, customs, history and beliefs for objective, universally applicable principles. Cultural relativism asks us to view the world from the perspective of others before passing judgments.
2. Cultural relativism promotes acceptance of diversity, which is essential in a pluralistic, democratic society.

The argument from tolerance



What is the argument implicit in the cartoon?

Ethnocentrism and other forms of cultural superiority have as their starting point a belief in the objectivity of ethics (there is a right way and a wrong way of doing things). By dismissing objectivity we encourage tolerance and diversity