

# Introduction to Ethics and Relativism

Ethics Unit I

# Introduction to ethics SGD

1. What are the sources of ethical principles? Brainstorm as many as you can. This question does not suppose any background in ethical theory. Rather it is asking you to think about how you and other people go about determining right from wrong on a daily basis.

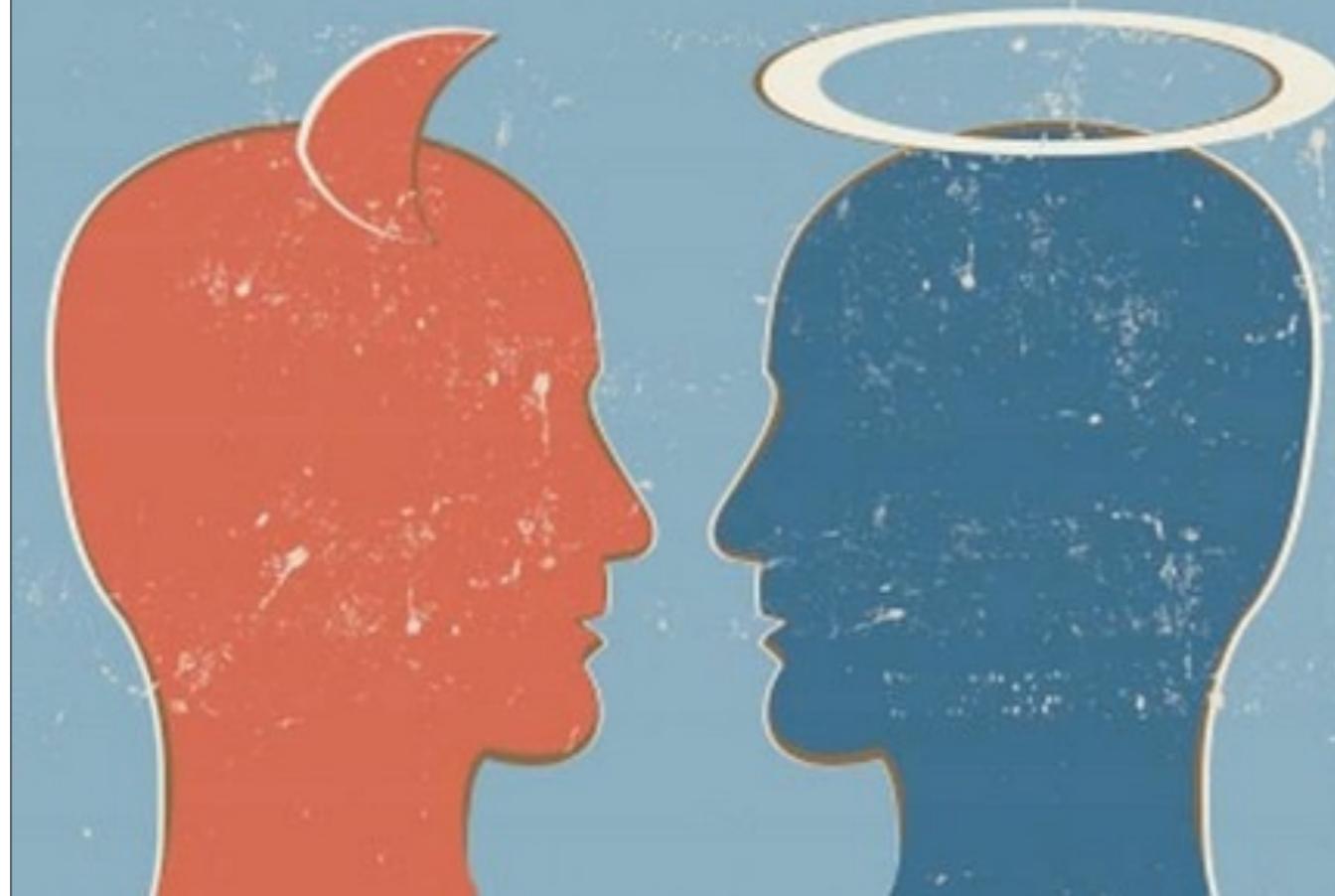
# Introduction to ethics SGD

2. What is more important in ethics - reason or emotion?  
Explain your answer and the conflicting views that arise in your group.

# Introduction to ethics SGD

3. Many people claim that ethics is all up to the individual.  
Do you believe this is true? Explain your answer.

# Introduction to Ethics



## Key terms for ethics

- Descriptive statement v. normative judgments/ is v. ought
- Relativism v. Objectivism
- Consequentialism v. non-consequentialism
- Acting from perception of the right v. acting to avoid punishment/consequences

## Definitions

Ethics is the study of all of the following questions:

- What is the good life?
- What constitutes right action?
- How can normative statements (ought) be derived from factual statements (is)
- What is value?
- How ought the above questions be answered?
- What is the basis relationship of self to other?
- Can any of the above questions be answered objectively?

# Major categories of ethical theory

## 1. Relativist theories

- Relativism
- Subjectivism

## 2. Deontological/Non consequentialist theories

- Divine command ethics
- Emanuel Kant's Ethical theories
- Emanuel Levinas and our duty to the other

## 3. Consequentialist theories

- Utilitarianism
- Aristotle's virtue ethics
- Ethical egoism
- Contractarianism

# Relativism: key definitions

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

Ethical universal/Ethical objectivism: 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

Descriptive relativism: The idea that different cultures have different ideas of what is right and wrong (What is the difference between the last two terms?)

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 Liberal Tradition (Western values that emerge from the Enlightenment) puts great emphasis on the individual, which necessarily makes the society that merges more relativistic

- MEN being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent. (Locke - *Second Treatise on Government*)
- "This little globe, which is but a point, rolls through space, as do many other globes; we are lost in the immensity of the universe. Man, only five feet high, is assuredly only a small thing in creation. One of these imperceptible beings says to another one of his neighbors, in Arabia or South Africa: 'Listen to me, because God of all these worlds has enlightened me: there are nine hundred million little ants like us on the earth, but my ant-hole is the only one dear to God; all the other are cast off by Him for eternity; mine alone will be happy, and all the others will be eternally damned.

They would then interrupt me, and ask which fool blabbed all this nonsense. I would be obliged to answer, "You, yourselves." I would then endeavor to calm them, which would be very difficult. (Voltaire, *Treatise on Toleration*)

- We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. (Declaration of Independence)

Relativism [is] itself an offshoot of individualism, whose principle is something like this: everyone has the right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value. People are called upon to be true to themselves and seek their own self-fulfillment. What this consists of, each must, in the last instance, determine for him- or herself. No one else can or should try to dictate its content (Taylor 14).

# 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.

Now, assess the strengths and weaknesses of this argument (list as many as you can).

Rachels argues that the conclusion does not follow from the premise. Imagine the following. I believe that  $2+2 = 5$ . Ms. Rodriguez believes that  $2+2 = 3$  and Mr. Machado 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 basic 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 anthropological/cultural differences argument for cultural relativism

- People in different societies will make different ethical judgments regarding the same action,
- If people in different societies make different ethical judgments regarding the same action, they must accept different ethical standards,
- If people in different societies accept different ethical standards, then there are no universal ethical standards

Therefore: There are no universal ethical standards

*Are there any ethical principles which are universal across cultures?*

## Questions to answer for Nussbaum:

- Do we have the right to judge other cultures when their practices are abhorrent to us?
- Are there cultural practices in America that may be judged as unethical by others? List and explain.
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the relativist position? (T chart - three examples each)
- Are you a relativist? Why or why not?

## Strengths and weaknesses of prescriptive relativism

- Culture clearly impacts our concept of ethics
- The anthropological argument
- Relativism promotes peace and tolerance
- Pluralism requires a relativist outlook

- Relativism strips us of our ability to condemn abhorrent practices
- Relativism fails to explain cultural critics and reformers
- There are weaknesses with the anthropological argument
- Prescriptive relativism is logically contradictory