

# ETHICS: Morality & Objectivism

## Lecture 22

Phil 1000, Fall 2008  
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## Quick Review

- What is Ethics/Morality?
  - Determining what one should do...
- Purpose of Ethics/Morality?
  - Guide action, judgment, social harmony
  - Ameliorate suffering, pursue “good life”
- Descriptive vs. Prescriptive claims
- Moral Relativism vs. Moral Objectivism

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## Relativism vs. Objectivism

### Moral Relativism

- The view that there are no universal or objective moral standards. Morality is relative to a given culture or group.
- More than simply saying different cultures/groups have different moral beliefs;
- Asserts that for each culture/group what is right or wrong is what that culture/group believes to be right or wrong; that is all that “right or wrong” amount to...

### Moral Objectivism

- The view that moral standards are universal and objective.
- Universal: all people (moral agents) are subject to these principles, irregardless of time, place, culture, etc.
- Objective: they are publically evaluable by rational discourse (argument), and not merely subjective views or feelings that are not open to public evaluation.

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## Benedict’s Account

- P1:** Morality is the set of cultural beliefs that determine acceptable or unacceptable behaviors; that is what is ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal.’
- Morality = normality...
- P2:** Different cultures have different beliefs about normality/ abnormality, that are conditioned by history (non-rational and subconscious).
- No one notion of normalcy is better than another...
- C:** Therefore, there is no objective (universal and non-relative) truth about morality.

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## Rachels’ Criticisms

How convincing is the argument for moral relativism (cultural relativism)?

1. Rests on an invalid argument
2. Its consequences are unacceptable
3. There is less disagreement across cultures than the argument suggests
4. Two lessons of moral relativism

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## 1. Cultural Differences Argument

- P1:** Different cultures have different moral codes (different beliefs about what is right and wrong).
- C:** Therefore, there is no objective truth in morality; right and wrong are relative to one’s culture.

Does the conclusion follow from the premise?  
No: why not?

**Rachels:** Just because there is disagreement doesn’t mean there is no objective truth about morality; e.g., just because flatlanders and roundworlders disagree about the shape of the earth doesn’t mean there is no objective truth about the shape of the earth. The argument is invalid.

Naturalistic Fallacy?

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## 2. Consequences of Moral Relativism

If moral relativism were true, then:

- Have no way to evaluate across cultures, but this goes counter to what we think.
- Have no way to evaluate our own moral codes, but this goes counter to what we think.
- The idea of moral progress is undermined, but this goes counter to what we think.

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## 3. Disagreement?

Cultural Differences Arguments is based on the disagreement between cultures; how much disagreement is there?

- **Rachels** argues there is more agreement than disagreement:
  - Focusing on one or two examples is not sufficient/representative;
  - All cultures must have some values in order to survive: value young, prohibition against lying and murder, etc.

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## 4. Lessons of Moral Relativism

- Don't think your culture has it absolutely right...
  - Be cautious about thinking your moral code is the right/correct one.
- Gut feelings (e.g., repugnance) are not an insight into morality, but may be an expression of cultural preferences...
  - Moral judgments about others should be tempered with an appreciation of the plurality of moral codes

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## Compare Arguments

### Benedict's Argument

**P1:** Morality is the set of cultural beliefs that determine acceptable or unacceptable behaviors; that is what is 'normal' or 'abnormal.'

**P2:** Different cultures have different beliefs about normality/abnormality, that are conditioned by history (non-rational and subconscious).

**C:** Therefore, there is no objective (universal and non-relative) truth about morality.

### Cultural Differences Argument

**P1:** Different cultures have different moral codes (different beliefs about what is right and wrong).

**C:** Therefore, there is no objective truth in morality; right and wrong are relative to one's culture.

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## Questions

- Does Rachels' criticism of moral relativism convince you there are objective moral principles/standards?
- If so, what kind of objective moral principles does moral objectivism give us?
- How well do they fill the function of morality?
  - Guide actions, judgments, ameliorate suffering?
- Is this any better than moral relativism?

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## Next Time

God and Morality:  
Divine Command Theory

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