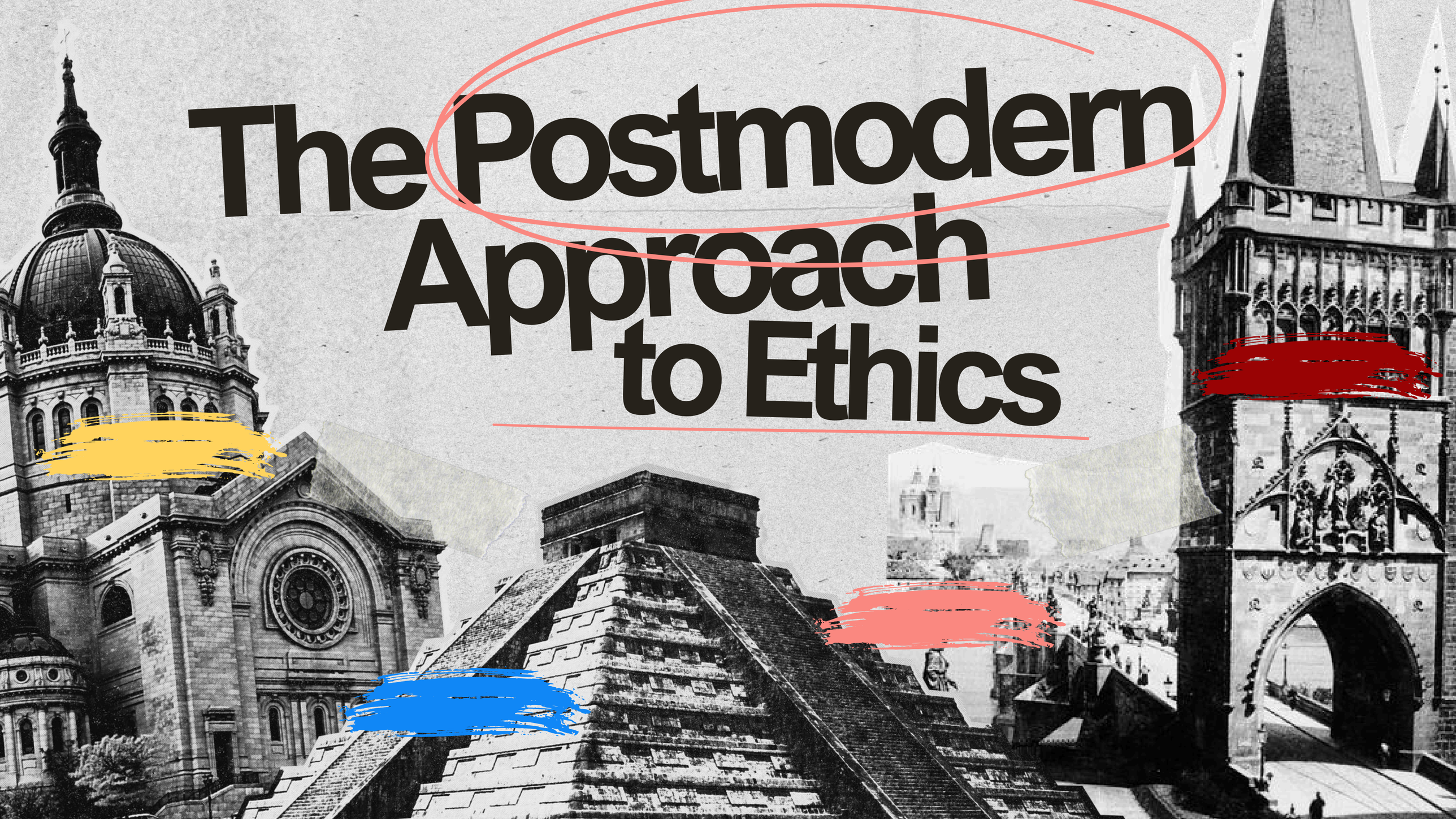
The Postmodern Approach to Ethics



Epistemology

1. The Old Paradigm of Knowledge
2. The Postmodern Paradigm of Knowledge

Epistemology

- is a branch of philosophy which deals with the study of knowledge.
- It is known as the **philosophy of knowledge.**
- It asks questions such as *what is the nature of human knowledge? How do we know? How do we know that we know?*

Epistemology

2 Primary tasks

1. We must determine the nature of knowledge
2. We must determine the extent of human knowledge;
   - *that is, how much do we, or can we, know?*

The Issue of Ethical Relativism

- Moral beliefs and practices of people are *greatly influenced by the environment* that surrounds them
- How do individual upbringing, social and cultural elements contribute to understanding of right and wrong?
- Given such phenomena, can we conclude that **morality is relative** (varies from one person to another or culture to culture) OR is **morality objective** (based on universal principles)?
- This is one major meta-ethical issue in philosophy that ethical relativism addresses

Ethical Relativism

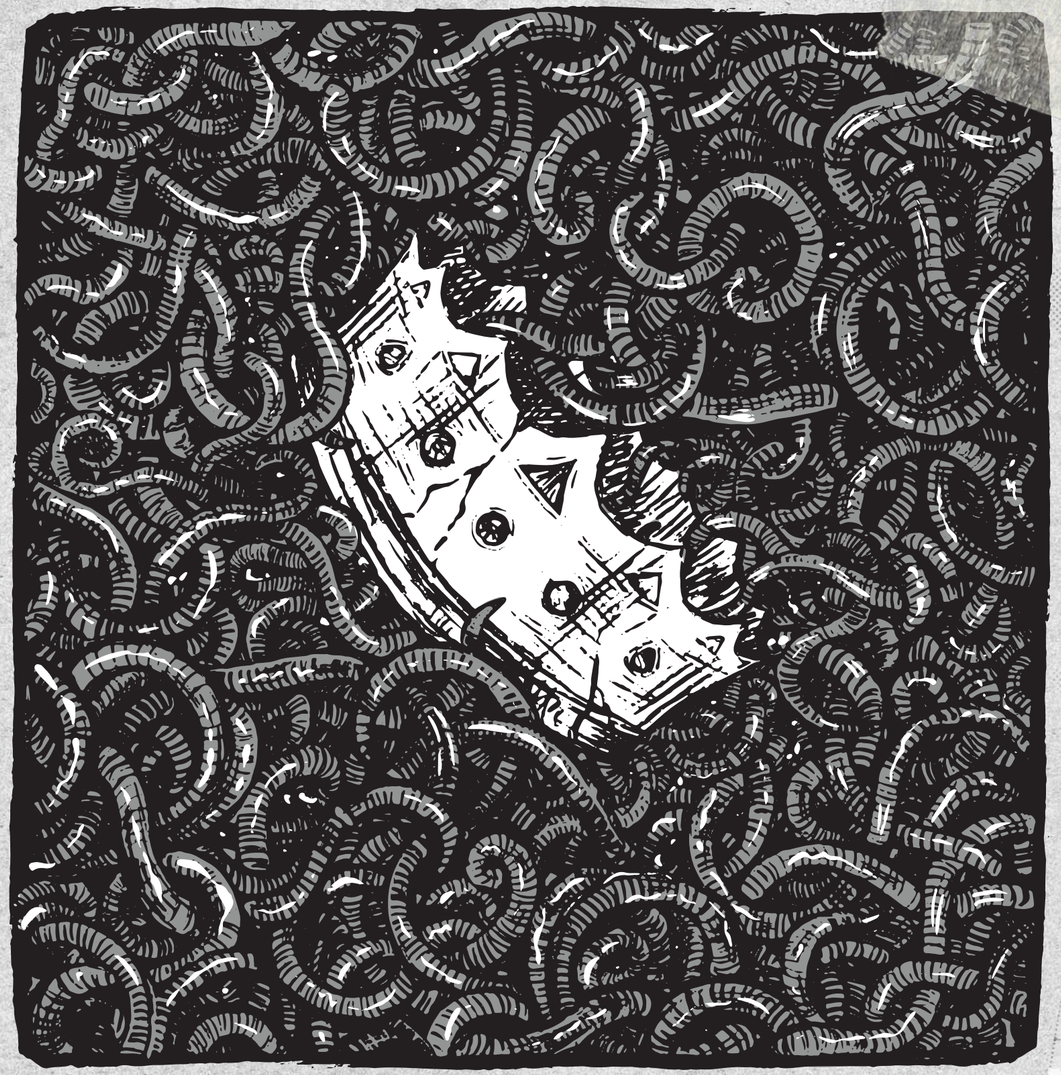
The view that holds all moral principles are valid **relative to a particular society or individual**

Ethical Skepticism

claims there are **no valid moral principles at all** (or at least we cannot know whether there are any)

Ethical Objectivism

asserts that there are **universally valid principles binding on all people.**



Moral Relativism

- a meta-ethical theory which asserts that **morality is relative on the subject**, whether the subject refers to society or the individual.
- Morality as ultimately dependent on the individual is the claim of **moral subjectivism** while morality being ultimately dependent on society is called **moral conventionalism.**
- As the term relative implies, moral relativism states that the nature of morality which include moral principles, laws and prohibitions, is **relative to either the perspective of the individual or the society of which the individual is a part.**

TWO FORMS OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Individual Ethical Relativism (Ethical Subjectivism)

- The rightness or wrongness of an action depends on the **individual's own commitments**
- Morality ultimately lies on the ***person's own standard***
- No objective standard exists outside the individual's perspective by which higher moral belief or standard can be judged
- A moral judgment is merely an ***attitude, opinion, preference or feeling*** held by someone

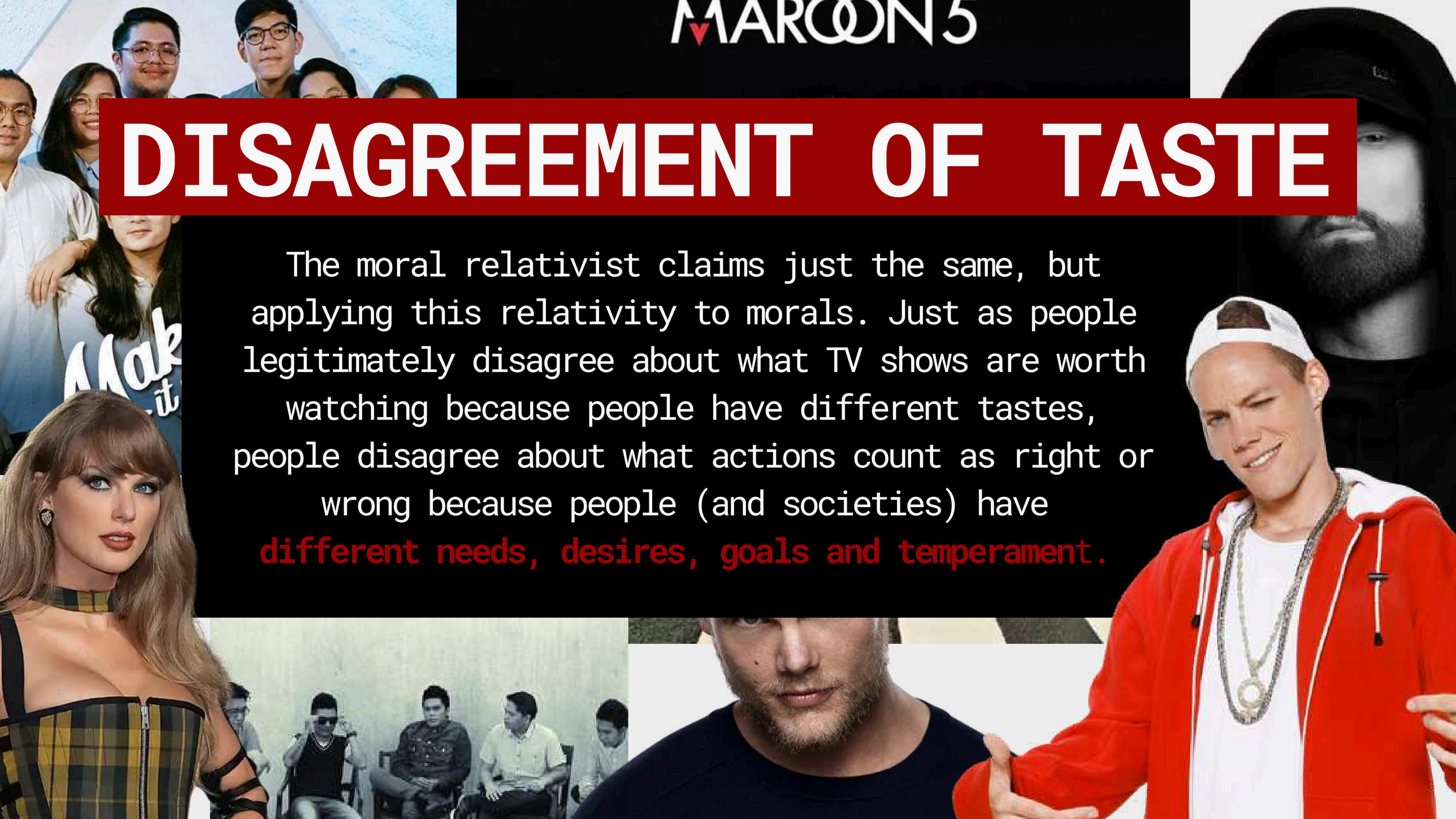
Cultural Ethical Relativism (Ethical Conventionalism)

- The rightness or wrongness of an act depends on the ***moral norms of society or the moral inclinations of the individual***
- No absolute moral standard exists by which different rules or inclinations can be judged
- What is morally right for a Chinese society may be morally wrong for Juan's society

MAROON 5
BEN&BEN
SILENT SANCTUARY
MONODRAMATIC

DISAGREEMENT OF TASTE

The moral relativist claims just the same, but applying this relativity to morals. Just as people legitimately disagree about what TV shows are worth watching because people have different tastes, people disagree about what actions count as right or wrong because people (and societies) have **different needs, desires, goals and temperament.**



Moral Subjectivism

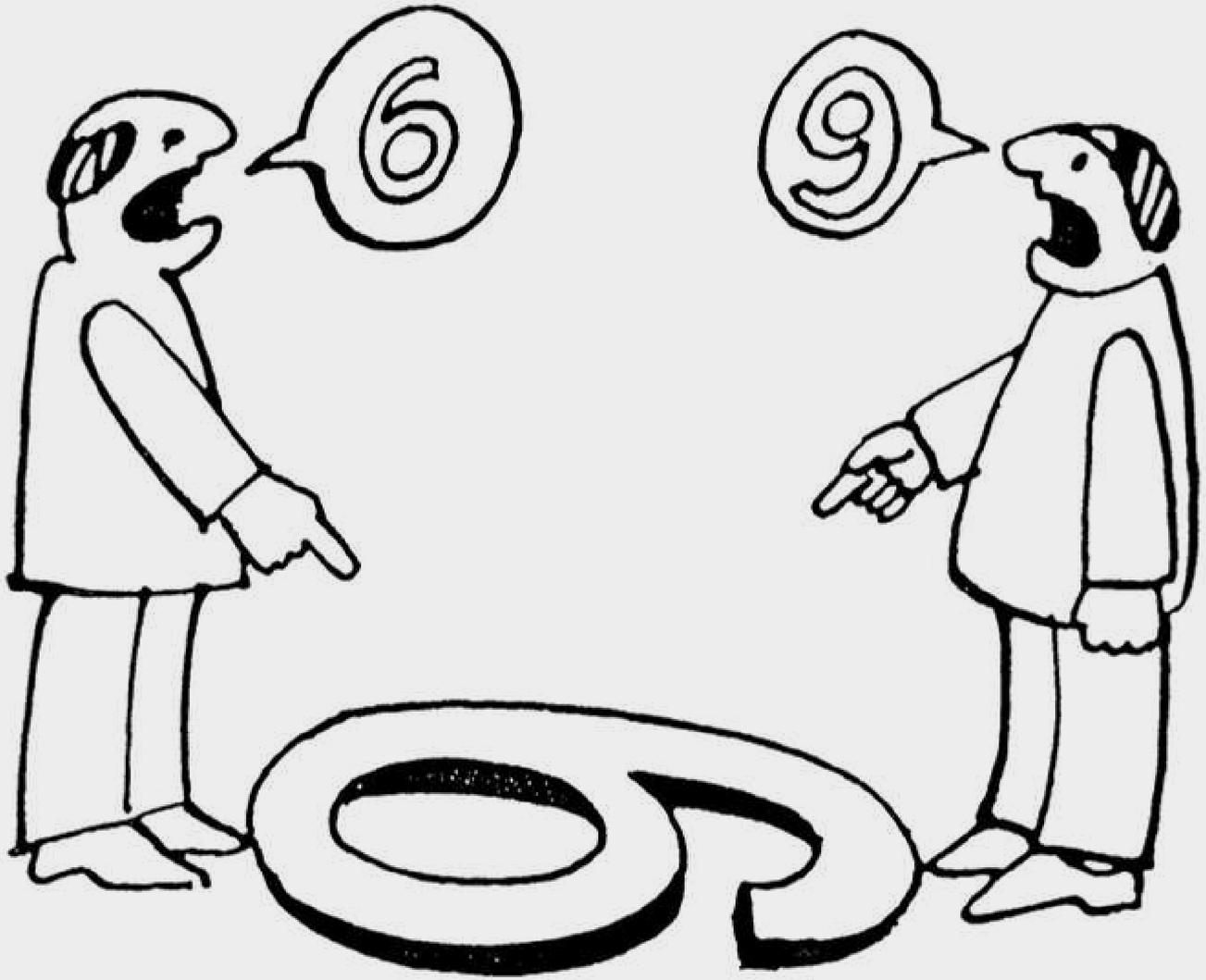
- the nature of right and wrong **depends on the caprice of any individual, and so we cannot impose our own moral opinions to others.**

- We want to question the truthfulness of this proposition but it seems that *it's not easy how we should proceed*.

- This difficulty leads some people to conclude that there really is **no objective moral fact that we can all know or discern but it depends solely on the individual.**

- The moral subjectivist may as well say that *morality is in the eye of the beholder.*

- **What may be wrong for you may be ok for me – end of discussion.**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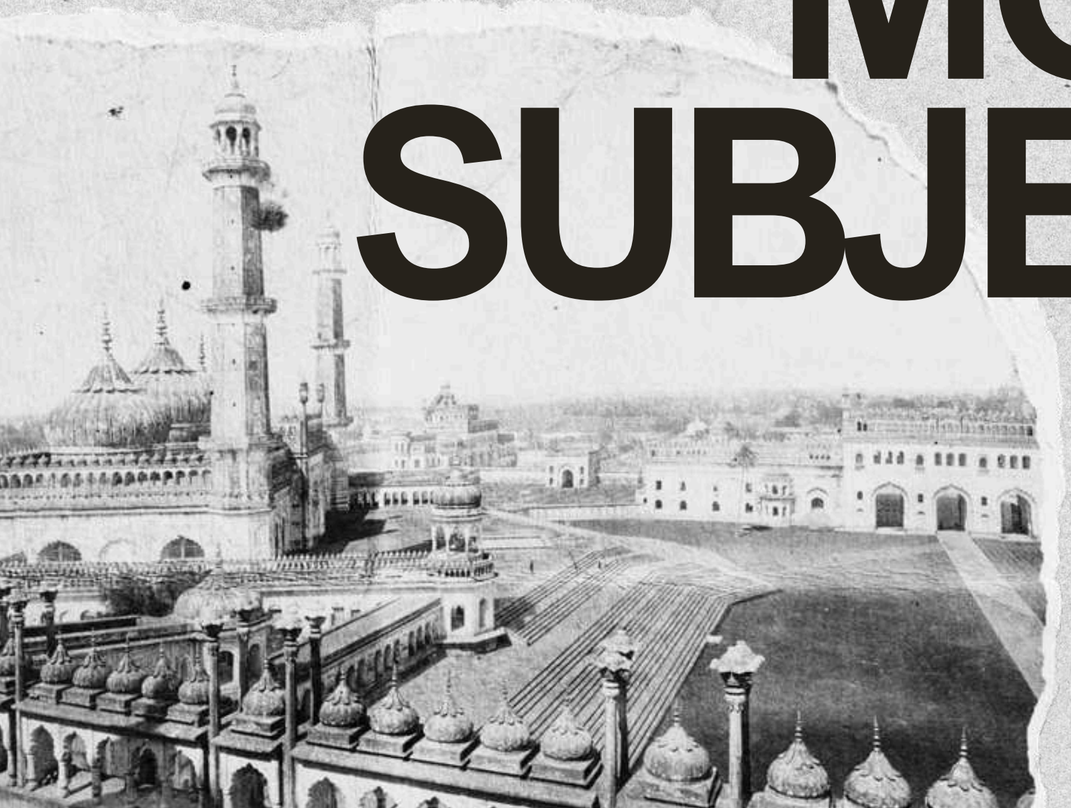
Arguments for MORAL SUBJECTIVISM



1 Argument from Moral Disagreements

The Problem of Final Verdicts in the Moral Sphere

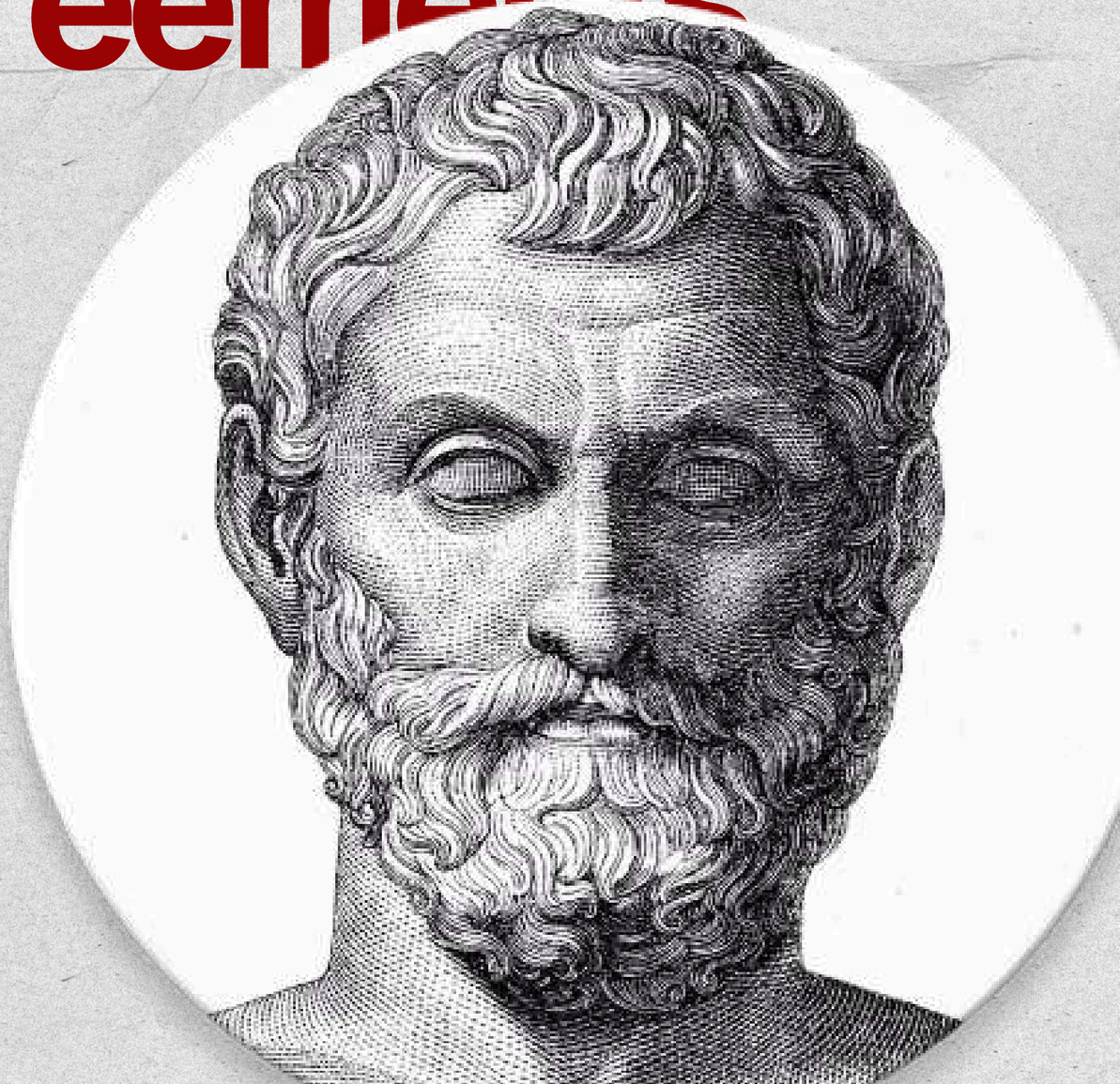
- Unlike many factual domains, the moral sphere is characterized by a **fundamental lack of consensus** on a wide range of issues (e.g., contraception, abortion, capital punishment).

- There appears to be no ethical issue upon which all parties unanimously agree, suggesting a **persistent polarity in moral viewpoints.**

1 Argument from Moral Disagreements

- Because of these seemingly intractable disagreements in morality, moral relativists use **such disagreements to argue that morality is relative to the individual.**

- ***Man is the measure of all things***, Pythagoras has said, and that includes morality, according to the moral subjectivist.



2 Argument from Queerness

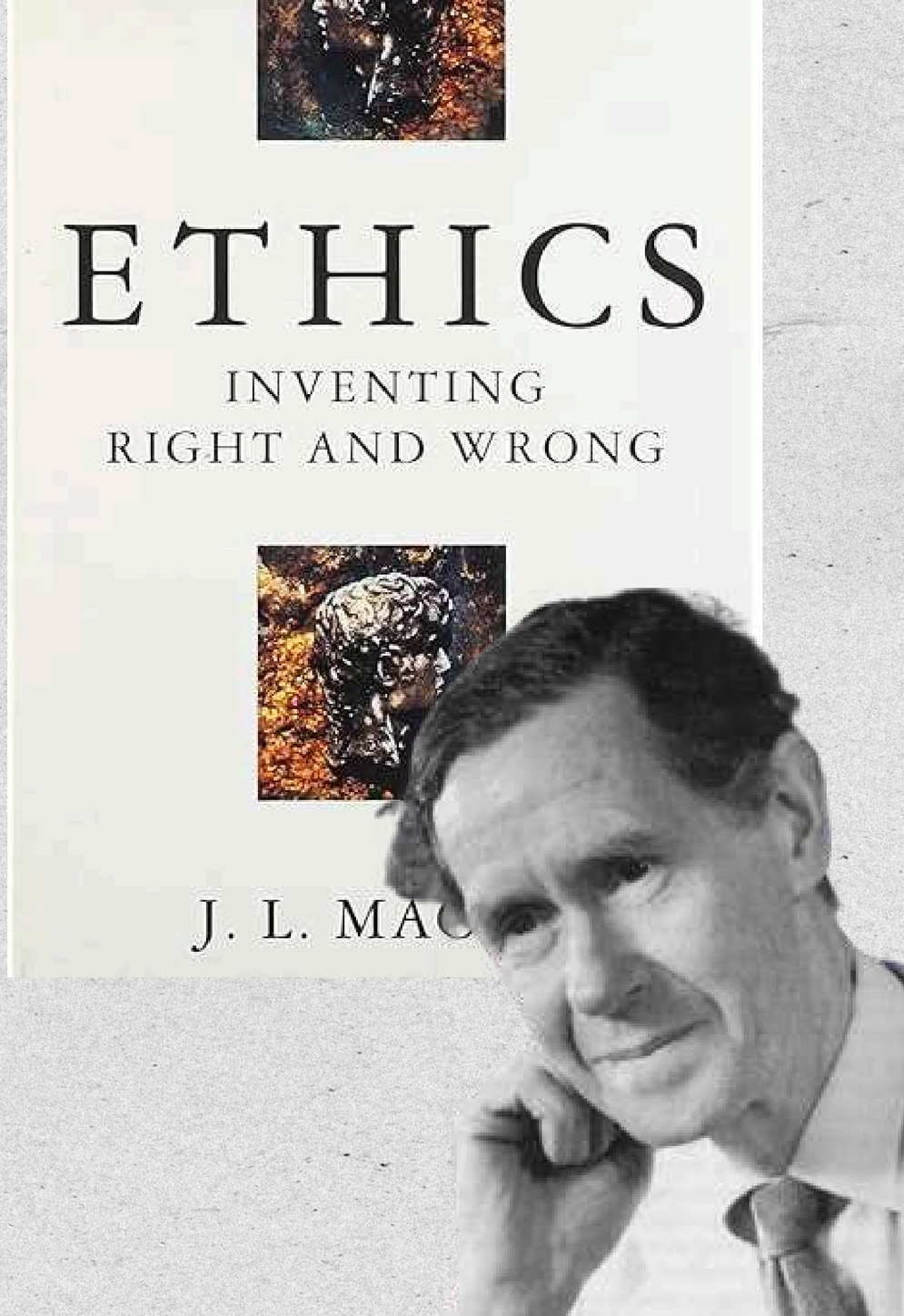
- Moral facts, if they exist, differ fundamentally from empirical facts.
  - Empirical objects (e.g., trees, tables, phones, shoes) are directly perceivable and seldom doubted.
  - Rightness and wrongness, however, **are not perceived in the same manner as material objects.**
  - Moral qualities **cannot be apprehended through the five senses.**

- Notice that **nothing in the natural world commands us to do or not do anything.** But moral principles are experienced as **commands, and commands are a result of agency.**

2 Argument from Queerness

- Without God to be the transcendent immaterial ground and the source of morality's normativity, objective moral principles *would be queer to exist in a purely material world such as ours*.

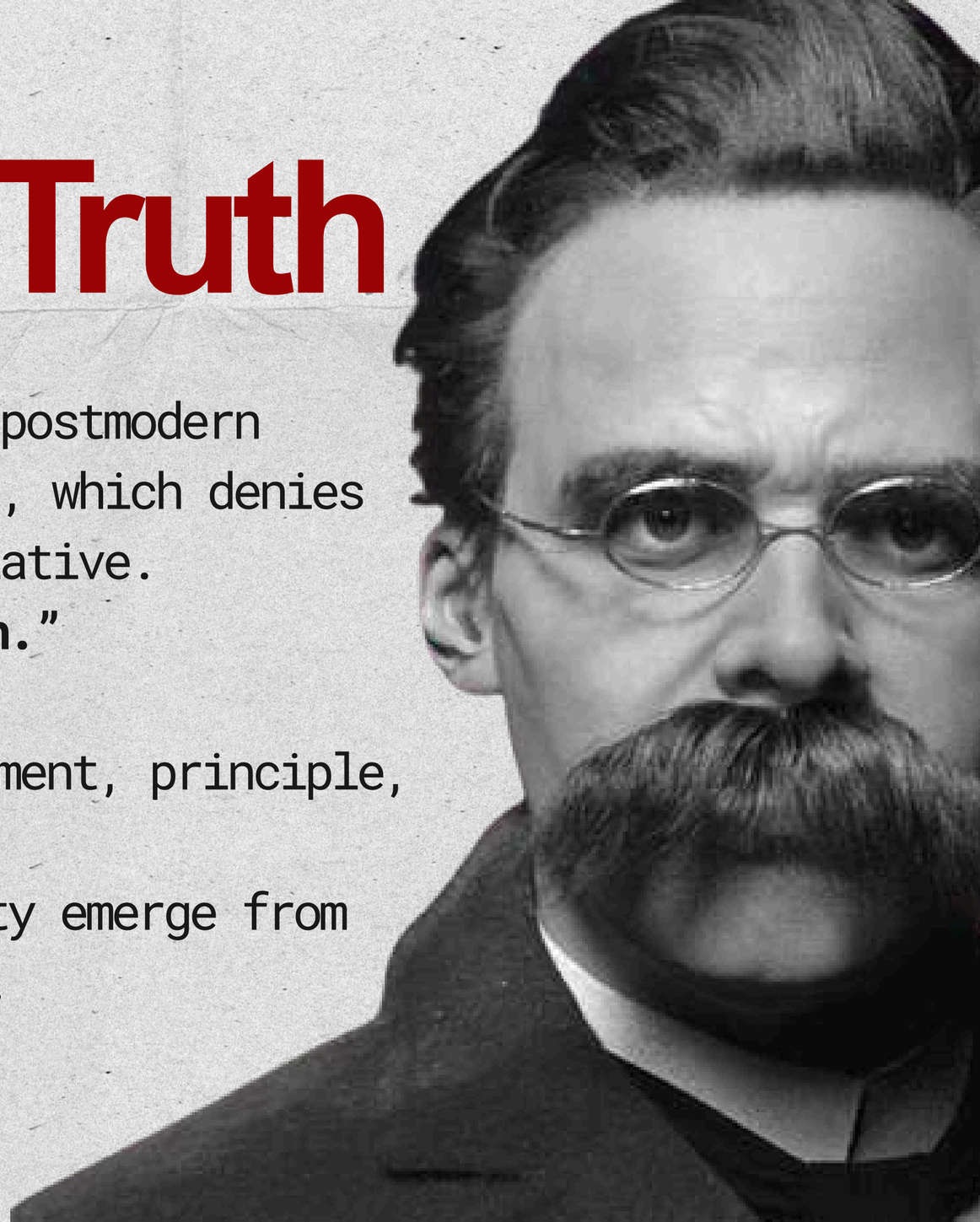
- Indeed, how can a purely naturalistic world give rise to objective values such as right and wrong?
  - **John Mackie**, who is the major proponent of this argument, is known to be an ardent and vocal atheist.
    - Since there is no God in Mackie's view, **morality is indeed queer**, and is just as subjective as our individual desires.
  - It therefore comes as no surprise that as the title of his book suggests: **we don't discover morality but rather invent it.**



3 Argument from the Relativity of Truth

- This argument is heavily purported by the postmodern thought, influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, which denies objective truth, claiming all truth is relative.
  - **“There is no truth, only interpretation.”**

- *Divergent* interpretations of the same document, principle, or text illustrate this claim.
  - E.g., Multiple sects within Christianity emerge from <u>differing interpretations</u> of the Bible.



Answering MORAL SUBJECTIVISM

1 RESPONSE to the Argument from Moral Disagreements

- Do disagreements prove that there is no truth about the matter?
- It does not necessarily follow.
- Just because there are heated disagreement in an area **does not follow that there is no truth about the matter.**
  - In fact, people continue the dialogue even if people disagree because it is assumed that there is truth about the matter.

- If we try to distinguish between three different kinds of moral disagreements, we will realize that **some of them are by nature resolvable.**

Three Kinds of Moral Disagreement

1. Factual Disagreements

- This means that both sides of the issue **disagree about the empirical facts of the matter**.
  - Both parties share similar moral principles
  - The disagreement stems from different understandings of the facts
  - The moral conclusion depends on which facts are actually true

Death Penalty

Is death penalty morally justified since it serves as a *successful deterrent* to potential criminals?

- Factual disagreements can be resolved through **empirical investigation** *(e.g., Look at the stats of effectivity)*
- Once the facts are established, moral conclusions can be drawn
- This type of disagreement is generally easier to resolve than other types of moral disagreement

Three Kinds of Moral Disagreement

2. Meaning disagreement pertaining to a moral issue

- Both parties are discussing a certain moral issue and the debate centers around what is ***the correct meaning of a term.***

- There are many debates in ethics that revolve around what the correct meaning of a particular term is: terms such as *justice, equality, tolerance, love*, to name a few.

Marriage

Traditional Understanding - For a long time, marriage has been long understood as a union between a man and a woman for the preservation and perpetuation of the nuclear family.

Postmodern stance - However, many are now enamored by the idea that marriage can be between two persons, regardless of their sex.

Justice

Retributive Justice - Justice means punishing wrongdoers proportionately.

Restorative Justice - Justice means repairing harm and reconciling relationships.

E.g., *Debate over whether juvenile offenders should be punished severely or rehabilitated.*

Three Kinds of Moral Disagreement

3. Value Disagreements

- Finally, the hardest kind of moral disagreement to resolve is value disagreements.
- Most of the disagreements of this kind agree with the relevant facts and meanings of terms that pertain to a certain moral issue.
- Both sides understand the facts and agree on definitions, **but they prioritize different values.**

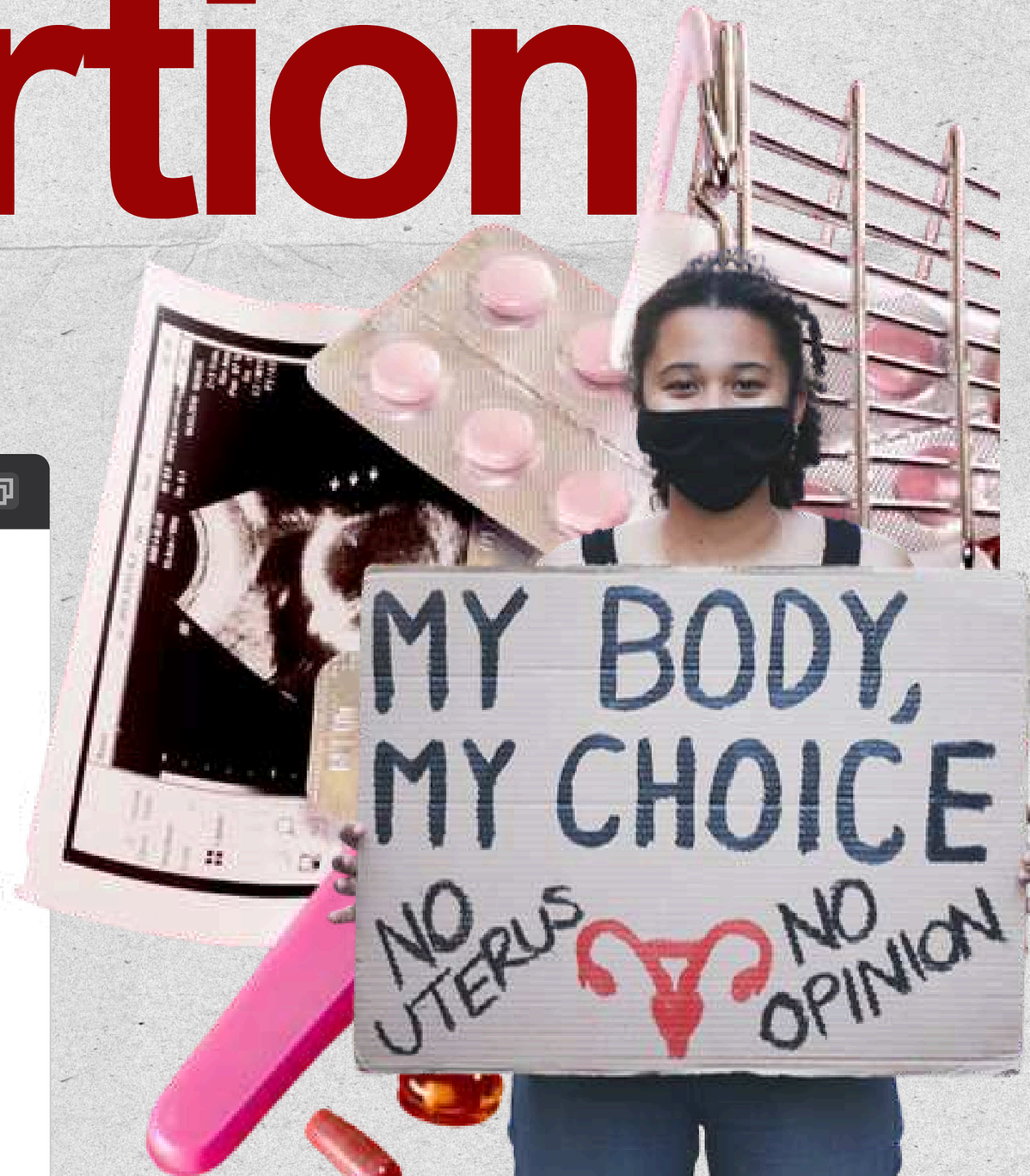
Abortion

Pro-Choice Position

- They favor the moral permissibility of abortion
- Slogan - "My body, my choice" - appealing to their so-called **sexual autonomy**
- Example:
  - Women who chose to abort their child in order to focus on their career. This choice entails that they value their career over the life of their child.

Pro-Life Position

- Abortion as morally impermissible
- For these people, the **life of one's child is more valuable** than one's career.



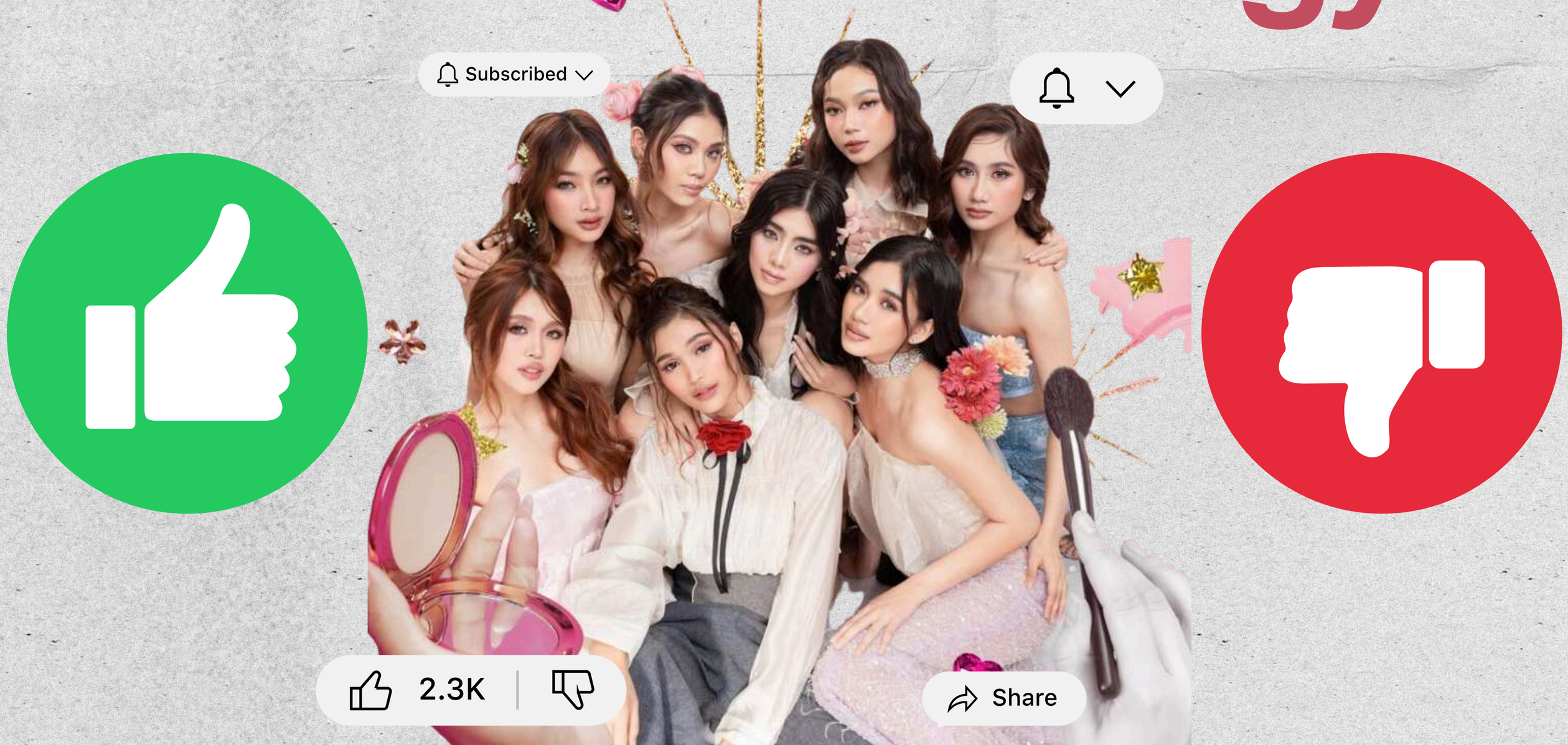
Resolving Value Disagreements

- One plausible way of resolving value disagreement is to point out **what values enhance one's own flourishing as human being, and even the flourishing of humanity as a whole.**

- Since one's flourishing is what **determines one's fulfillment in life**, no one would debate the necessity of seeking one's own flourishing. The debate then focuses on what values truly enhance or impede one's flourishing.

- Thus, the assumption that moral disagreements prove that **there is no objective morality is deeply mistaken.**

The Actor Analogy



The Actor Analogy

KEY PRINCIPLES

Indeed, disagreement about X does nothing to prove the nonexistence of X.

- There are disagreements in law, sciences and policymaking.
- In fact, in every field of inquiry, **as long as there are two separate minds, it is bound to have disagreeing views about it**.

2 RESPONSE to the Argument from Queerness

Mackie's Argument from Queerness

Moral facts are *"queer" or strange* because they don't exist as physical objects in space and time, making their objective existence questionable.

What We Concede to Mackie

- We agree that **we do not see moral facts** as if they are physical objects existing in space and time
- We **affirm their existence** but their nature is that they are immaterial and is thus *not part of the spatiotemporal universe*
- We may even agree that *it is hard to comprehend the actual objective existence* of such facts if they are **not amenable to the senses**

2 RESPONSE to the Argument from Queerness

But does this imply that Moral Facts are not true or nonexistent?

Hardly.

If we can find some things that we believe to be true, then we have already defanged Mackie's argument.

Numbers

- Numbers serve as excellent examples of **immaterial but objective entities.**

- Numbers exist in such a way that they are **independent of human opinions.**

- There is already *one* universe, *one* solar system, *one* earth, on which we live that existed billions of years before the first *homo sapiens* came on the scene.

Numbers

- Although some may claim that **mathematics is just an invention of the human mind**, this idea is hard to fathom.
  - We don't invent numbers the way that humans have invented cellular phones, helmets and refrigerators.
  - Inventors can change, improve and modify their inventions to suit different need and desires.

The Unchangeable Nature of Mathematics

- We can't suddenly make 2 + 2 equal to 5 *just because we want it to be that way.*
- No amount of willpower will change these basic rules of mathematics.
- The nature of numbers is such that **they are universal and objective** but nevertheless **REAL.**

2 RESPONSE to the Argument from Queerness

Just because we don't empirically see the "rightness" in charity or the "wrongness" in oppression **doesn't follow that the rightness and wrongness of these acts aren't real.**

3 RESPONSE to the Argument from the Relativity of Truth

- How should we respond to the moral subjectivist who uses the relativity of truth to argue for the relativity of morality?
  - By using his claim to argue against him.

- For those who assert that there is no objective truth, you should simply ask them:
  - ***"Is that objectively true?"***
  - Again, the same dilemma and unacceptable consequences apply.
- **If he answers yes**, then that defeats his claim that there is no objective truth since he is claiming that the statement "there is no objective truth" is objectively true.
- **If he answers no,** then we have no reason to believe his claim since it is found to be not objectively true. Either way, the option is unacceptable.

3 RESPONSE to the Argument from the Relativity of Truth

- Such postmodern claims about truth are commonly known to be self-defeating statements, or if you want a more technical term, **self-referentially incoherent propositions.**
  - **Self-defeating statements** are statements that can't live up to the standard that those statements itself set.

Conclusion

- These relativist arguments **defeat themselves by their very nature**.
- They cannot consistently maintain their own position without contradicting their fundamental claims.

FEELINGS & MORAL DECISION-MAKING

Subjectivism (SB):

"X is good" means "I like X."

Pick your moral principles by following your feelings.

Preliminaries

1. **Emotions as a necessity for ethical judgment**
   - Feelings are considered essential components of moral decision-making
   - Emotions are viewed as *instinctive and trained responses* to moral dilemmas
   - This challenges the idea that emotions cloud or compromise ethical reasoning

2. **Reason and Emotion are complementary**
   - Reason and emotion are not opposites in ethical thinking
   - Both abstract inference (rational thought) and emotional intuitions play important roles in identifying what is valuable

feelings

are also visceral (insttictual) by providing motivations to act morally

emotions

can be rational in beng based at least sometimes on good judgments abou how well a cicurmstance or agent accomplsihes appropriate objecives

Moral judgments ***express personal feelings or emotions.***

Moral principles are chosen by following one's **own preferences.**

Feelings	Emotions
Mental reactions to emotions; triggered in the neo-cortex.	Primitive, subconscious, limbic system-based reactions.
Subjective, learned, and personal.	Objective, universal, and instinctual.
Arises after the body has processed an emotion.	Occurs instantly as a biochemical reaction in the body.
Can last for days, weeks, months.	Lasts for minutes, even seconds.
Sadness, love, resentment, guilt, anxiety, loneliness.	Excitement, fear, sadness, disgust, anger, joy.
A personal mental experience.	A physical state.
Cognitive (mental)	Physiological (body)
Conscious	Subconscious
Can be concealed.	Visible on face/body through micro-expressions, posture, etc.

Emotivism

- Emotivism is the most popular form of **Non-Cognitivism.**
- Non-Cognitivism - ethical sentences **do not express genuine propositions.**
- Moral judgments - expressions of the speaker's emotions, usually **feeling-based**, not factual claims.

Just express feelings (emotivism):

"Brrr!"
"Ha, ha!"
"Wow!"
"Hurrah for X!"

Truths about feelings (subjectivism):

"I feel cold."
"I find that funny."
"I'm impressed."
"I like X."

Emotivism

- Moral claims **cannot be true or false** (FACTUAL CLAIMS) because they simply reflect how someone feels.

Moral Conventionalism

- Morality is *not based on individuals* (like subjectivism) but is **relative to society or culture.**
- What is morally right or wrong depends on the customs, norms, and traditions of a society.
- It's hard to find consistent moral subjectivists, but moral conventionalists are common.
- In philosophy classes and textbooks, “moral relativism” usually refers to **conventionalism.**
- **Globalization** opened for clash of worldviews and cultures.
  - People begin to doubt the superiority of their own worldview.
  - Other cultures appear equally coherent and reasonable.

A Challenge to Universal Morality

Some anthropologists and social scientists argue that…

- Universal human rights are ***not truly universal***.
- They are ***Western inventions***, rooted in Western culture.

This raises the question:

"Can moral truths really be universal? Or are they just cultural products?"

Arguments for MORAL CONVENTIONALISM

1 Argument Based on the Survival Value of Cultural Morality

- As mentioned, most proponents of moral conventionalism are anthropologists who have done extensive research on different cultures and discovered the great differences between moral rules and ideas.

- With that discovery, they concluded that ***morality is something that societies invent in order for their people to survive***.
  - In other words, cultural morality has a survival value for those who follow it.

Inuit (Eskimo) Culture

- **Elderly are expected to end their lives in front of relatives, which is then celebrated.**
  - Outsider view - Appears violent or disrespectful to the elderly.
  - Insider view - Elders willingly accept DEATH.

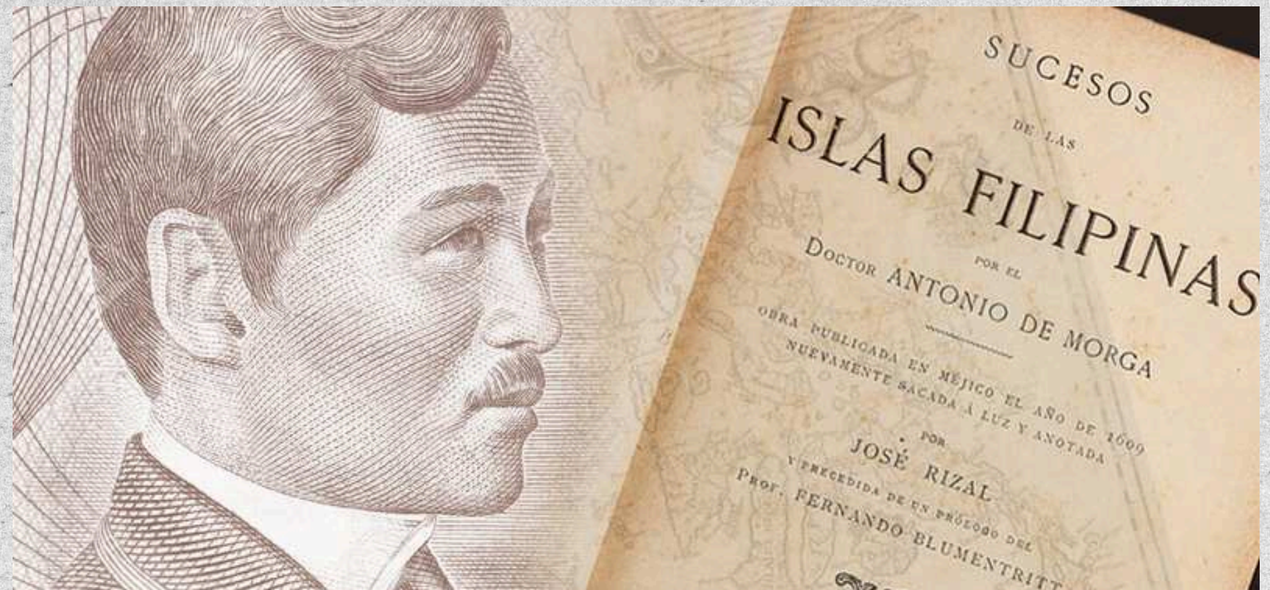
- Food is **scarce-feeding** those unable to hunt/fish strains survival.
- Inuit believes that the elder “graduates” from this life to another, **so it’s seen as honorable.**
- The celebration is not of death itself, but of **a life well-lived and hope for the next life.**

1 Argument Based on the Survival Value of Cultural Morality

- Moral norms function as **survival strategies.**
- What looks wrong to outsiders may be *vital for survival in that culture.*
- To criticize such practices is to *misunderstand their adaptive purpose.*

2 Argument against Ethnocentrism

- Another reason advanced in support of moral conventionalism is the idea that it attacks **ethnocentrism**, *the prejudicial view that interprets all of reality through the eyes of one's own cultural beliefs and values*, as Pojman defined it.
  - Indeed, to impose one's culture on another especially when it involves force, would be tantamount to **oppression**.



2 Argument against Ethnocentrism

- Ethnocentrism should not be practiced and **moral conventionalism** is an idea that seems *the exact weapon created to counter it.*

- Moral conventionalism states that **all cultures are equal and no culture has the right to impose their culture onto another.**

3 Argument for Tolerance

- The moral conventionalist is not only passionate to fight the evils of ethnocentrism but also to promote something: ***the value of tolerance***.

- So-called **universal moral principles** and rules are seen by the moral conventionalist to be *nothing but **expressions of imperial thinking** set to impose one's cultural norms onto another*.
  - *"Live and let live,"* is the natural mantra of the moral conventionalist.

- **Tolerance** is seen as a virtue of open-mindedness and humility by the moral conventionalist.

3 Argument for Tolerance

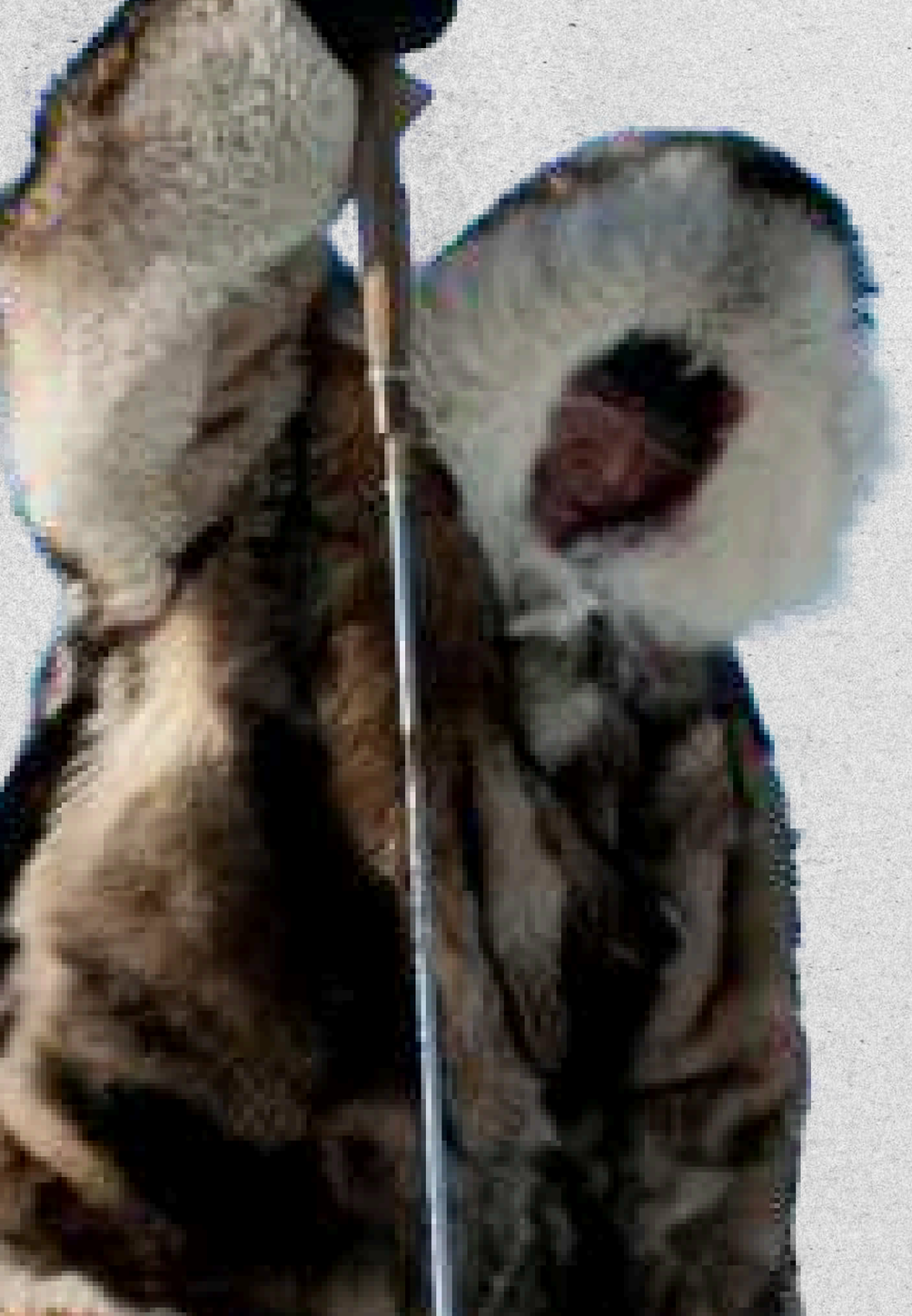
Other people have thoughts, worldviews, desires and goals that *need not coincide with ours and we should be humble* enough to do that and **open enough to accept such diversity.**

Answering MORAL CONVENTIONALISM

1 RESPONSE Argument Based on the Survival Value of Cultural Morality

- Moral conventionalism argues that because societies have different moral rules, ***each society should decide what is right and wrong for itself.***

- At first, this sounds convincing, since anthropology shows that cultures do have diverse practices.
  - But does cultural diversity mean that whatever a society does is automatically right?



- What if Eskimos found another hunting ground that can supply enough food even for the elderly?

- With this, the Argument Based on the Survival Value of Cultural Morality ***cannot hold.***

- **Not all customs can be explained by survival.**
- The practice of *sati* in India, where widows burned themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, was not about survival rather it was about harmful beliefs that devalued women.
    - Clearly, not every cultural practice is morally acceptable just because it exists.

- Thus, while moral conventionalism highlights tolerance and respect for diversity, it cannot justify all cultural practices.
- **Some customs rest on false or harmful beliefs, and these can and should be criticized.**

2 RESPONSE to the argument against Ethnocentrism

- Moral conventionalists say they fight against ethnocentrism.

- They argue that moral rules are relative to societies, hence ***nobody should impose their moral standards on another culture.***
- But here's the problem: conventionalists also say ethnocentrism is always wrong. **That's a contradiction.**
    - If morality really depends on society, then a society that believes ethnocentrism is right must be respected too. In that case, the conventionalist has no way to say ethnocentrism is wrong everywhere.

2 RESPONSE to the argument against Ethnocentrism

- This shows the weakness of moral conventionalism:
  - it cannot consistently criticize harmful practices, because by its own logic, anything a society accepts—including ***ethnocentrism, slavery, or oppression***—must be considered right.

- **To truly oppose ethnocentrism, one would need some <u>universal moral principle</u>, which conventionalism denies.**

3 RESPONSE to the Argument for Tolerance

- Moral relativists say their philosophy **encourages tolerance** and respect for cultural diversity.
- But here's the problem:
  - to say "everyone should practice tolerance" is already a **universal claim** and *relativists deny that universal moral values exist.*

- If one society believes in intolerance, the relativist has to say that intolerance is right for that society.
  - This means they cannot really promote tolerance as something all people should follow.

3 RESPONSE to the Argument for Tolerance

- If they insist on tolerance as a universal value, they're being inconsistent and even *ethnocentric*, because they're imposing their cultural preference for tolerance on other societies.

- Therefore, **relativism cannot logically defend tolerance without turning into moral objectivism.**

Objections to MORAL SUBJECTIVISM

1 Moral conventionalism is *inimical* to the idea of universal human rights

- **Universal human rights** assume that all human beings possess certain inalienable rights—*life, liberty, property*—that *no culture or society has the authority to deny.*

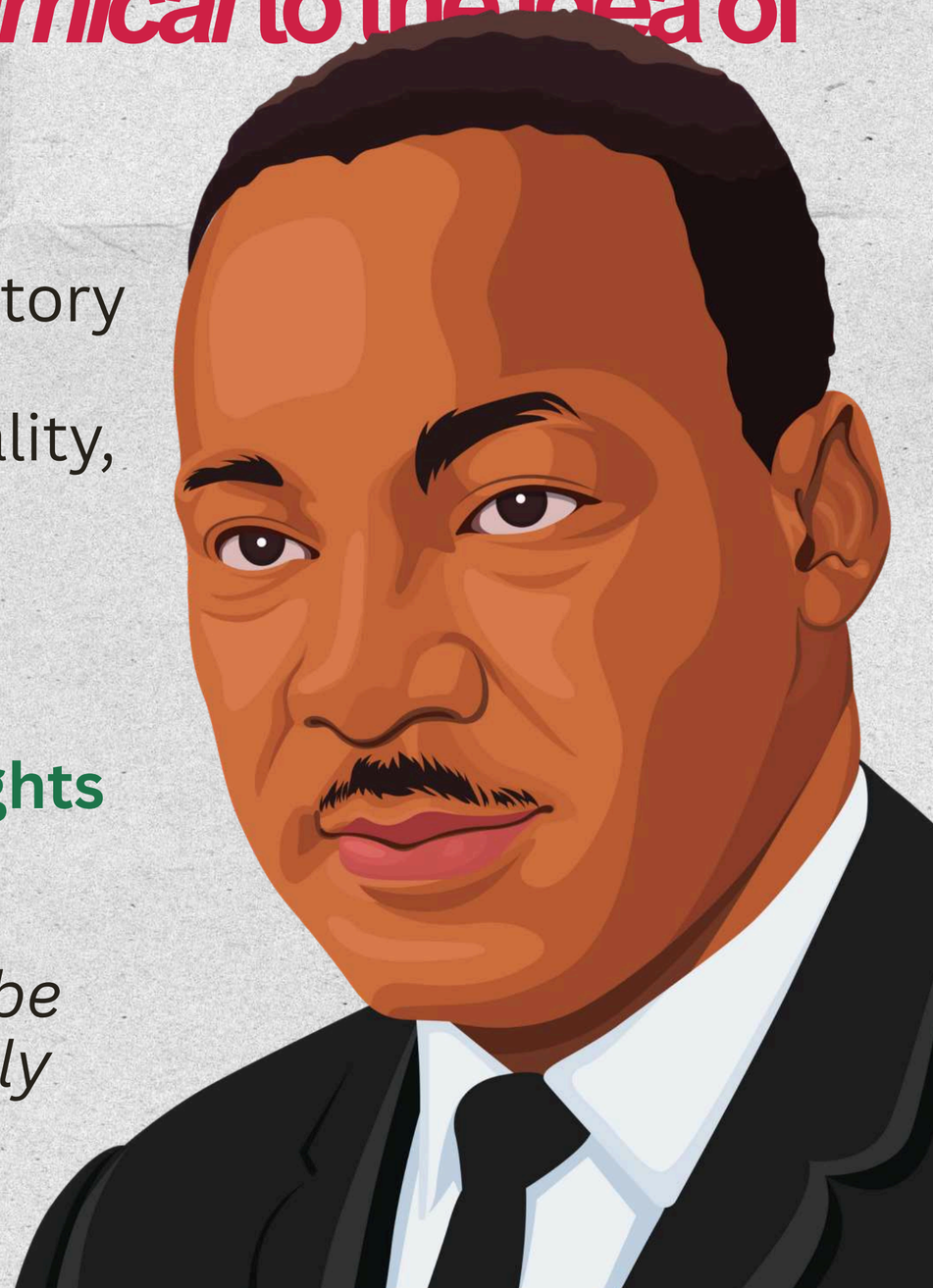
- If moral conventionalism is true, then no such universal rights exist. Each society defines right and wrong for itself, which means:
  - We *cannot condemn* societies that allow violence against women, slavery, or oppression, if such practices are socially accepted.

1 Moral conventionalism is *inimical* to the idea of universal human rights

- This is deeply troubling, as moral progress in history such as:
  - Martin Luther King Jr. fighting for racial equality,
  - William Wilberforce opposing slavery,
  - other movements against discrimination, colonization, and oppression

- All rest on the belief that **human beings have rights regardless of their culture.**

- Without universal rights, *moral progress would be impossible, because nothing could be universally judged as unjust.*



2 Moral conventionalism entails that *there are no universal human values*

- Moral conventionalism ***denies the universality of justice, love, fairness, equality, and other core values.***
  - For the relativist, these are **only cultural inventions.**

- But this denial contradicts our common moral experience:
  - Societies cannot thrive without trust, fairness, and rules.
  - Justice is not a cultural option; it is a moral requirement that overrides self-interest.

- To think that justice is only relative is a basic moral mistake because **rational human beings recognize some values as binding regardless of cultural differences.**

- Thus, relativism **erodes the very foundations of moral life by treating indispensable values as** ***optional.***

3 Moral conventionalism entails that *social reformers are immoral*

Social reformers are those individuals who did something heroic and extraordinary by fighting all the social pressures around them and attacking the evils that they find in their society.

3 Moral conventionalism entails that *social reformers are immoral*

- If moral conventionalism is true:
  - Reformers are immoral because they defied their society's moral code, which is supposed to be the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong.

- This is absurd since we celebrate these figures precisely because **they exposed injustice and pushed society toward genuine moral progress.**

- The relativist, however, has no basis to admire them without contradicting himself.

The Ted Bundy Test to Moral Relativism

The Case of Ted Bundy

- Ted Bundy was a notorious American **serial killer who raped and murdered more than 30 women.**

- In his own words (recorded on tape), Bundy reasoned that since all moral judgments are subjective, **there is no rational basis to value the lives of his victims more than his own pleasure.**

- Hence, if morality is just a matter of personal values, then killing for his enjoyment is no worse than someone else enjoying a meal of ham.

The Ted Bundy Test to Moral Relativism

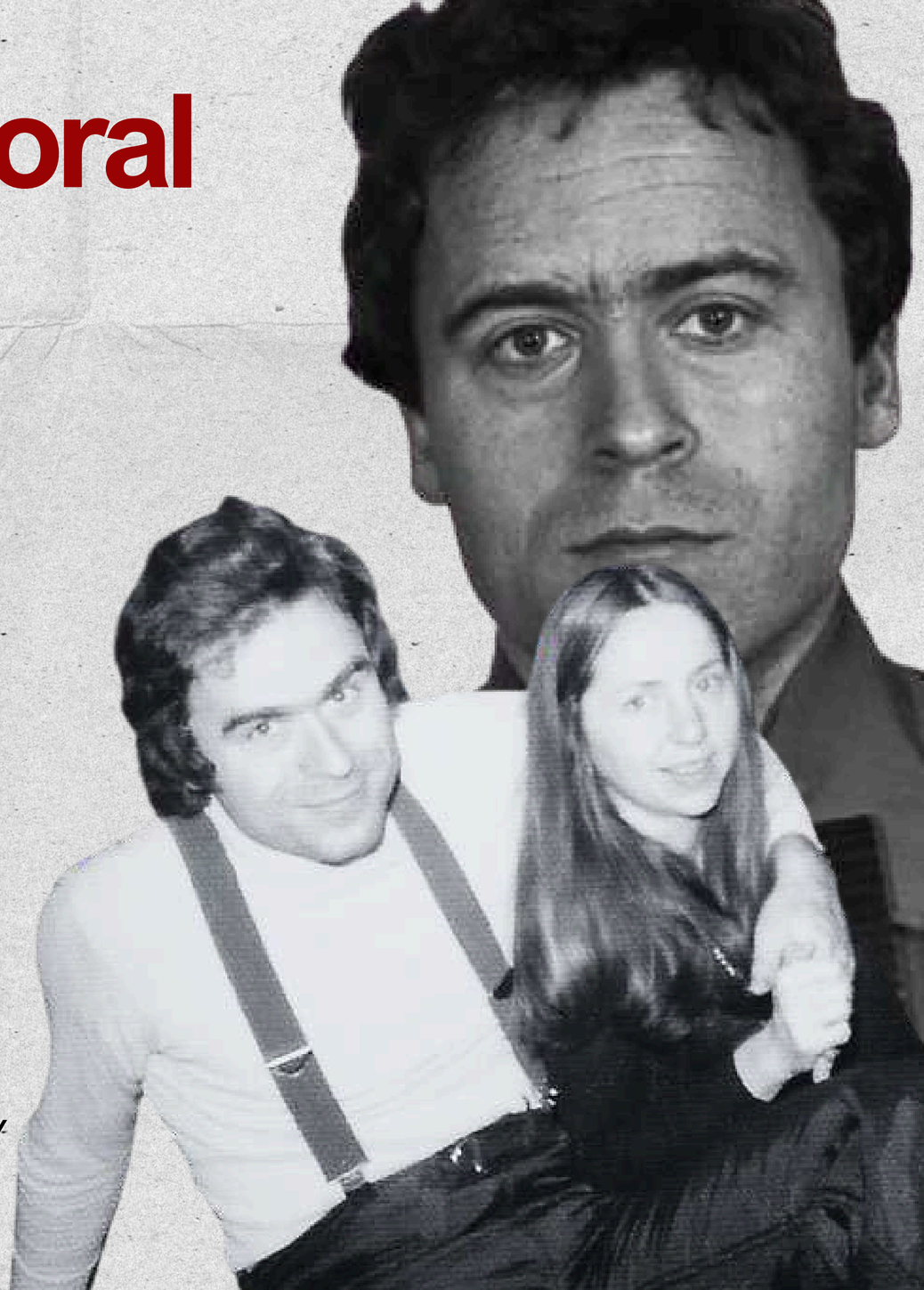
The Problem for Relativism

If moral relativism is true, then:

- We cannot legitimately condemn Bundy's actions.
- At best, we can say, "We don't like what he did," but not that "he was wrong."

As philosopher T. M. Scanlon points out:

- Relativism *"threatens to deprive us of…the sense that our condemnation of certain actions is legitimate and justified."*
    - But Bundy's actions are not just subjectively disliked, **they are objectively wrong**, and *any theory that denies this is dangerously defective*.



The Ted Bundy Test to Moral Relativism

Reductio ad Absurdum

The Ted Bundy Test functions as a *reductio ad absurdum* argument:

- If a theory **implies something absurd, the theory must be false.**
  - Moral relativism implies that Bundy's murders cannot be condemned as wrong in any objective sense.
  - This is absurd and unacceptable.
  - Therefore, moral relativism is false.

Ethics of Convenience

Despite strong objections, some still cling to relativism because it is convenient.

Moral Relativism

Relativism as Unlivable

Carried to its extreme, moral relativism becomes unlivable.

- Nobody can truly live in a world where:
  - Stealing is always acceptable.
  - Rape and cruelty are normalized.
  - Killing for fun is permitted.

- Even relativists depend on laws and justice to live safely and function in society.

- **Laws themselves** ***assume universal standards of justice and fairness.***

Dependence on Universal Values

Relativists expect:

- To be **treated justly** in dealings with others.
- Their **rights to be recognized,** regardless of what others believe.
- Others to **follow the laws** of society, which make life secure and orderly.

- Their reliance on these values shows ***they unconsciously believe in moral objectivity.***

Morality and Inconvenience

True morality is not about convenience.
Often, moral duties require:

- Sacrifice,
- Pain, or
- Personal inconvenience.

- But morality **obligates us to do what is right and avoid what is wrong**, because of our nature as sentient and rational beings.

Moral Objectivism

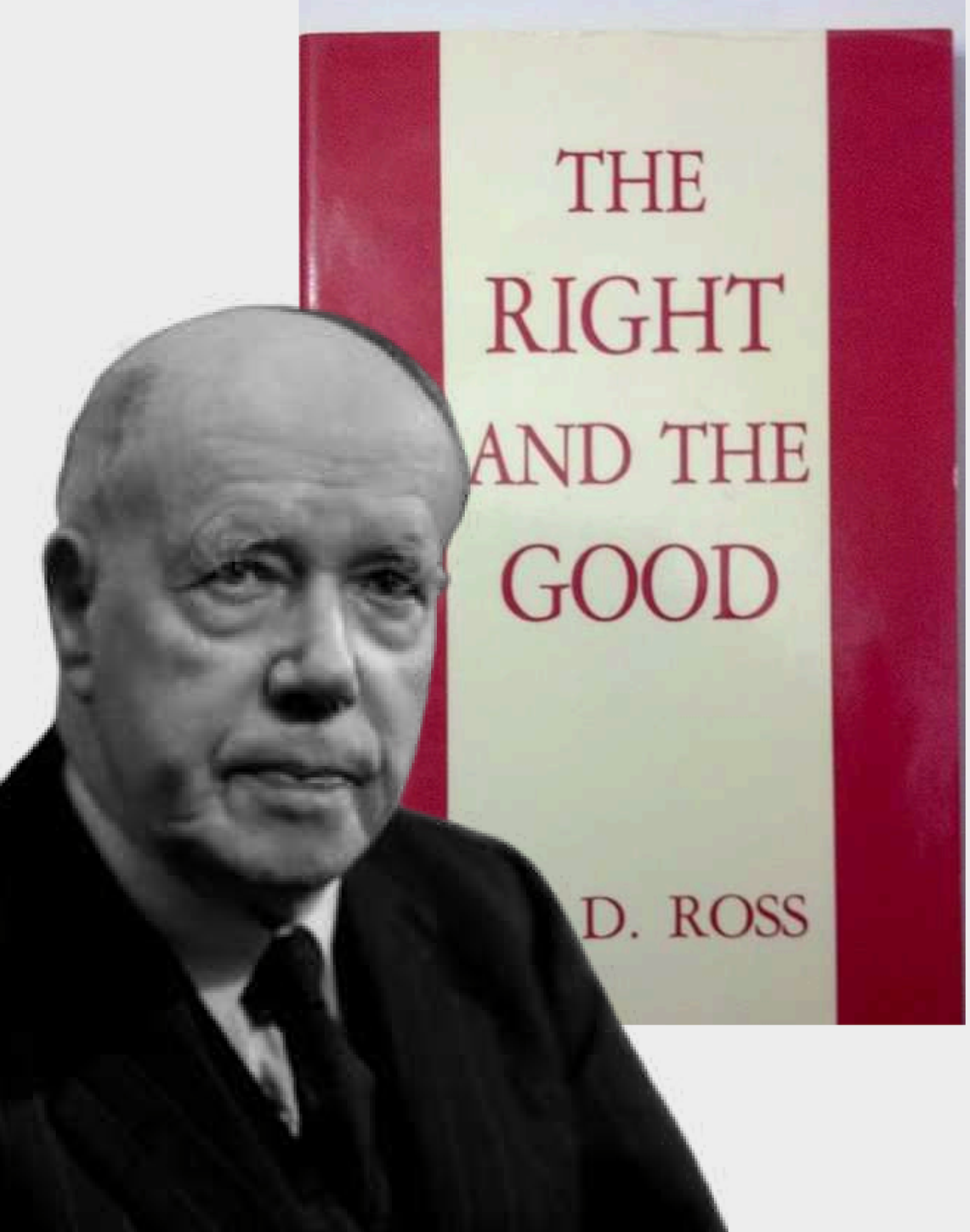
- the view that there are moral facts and true moral claims whose existence and nature are **independent of our beliefs about what is right and wrong** (Brink, 1989: 20).
  - E.g., Hitler's genocide is objectively wrong, even if a socierty believed otherwise.

- A moral objectivist believes that "**there are objective universal moral principles, valid for all people and all social environments**".

Moral Absolutism

- belives that **“there are nonoverrideable moral principles that one ought never violate.”**
- A well-known example of a moral absolutist is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant.
  - In his oft-cited article entitled ‘On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy’, Kant starts from the presupposition that lying is an absolute moral wrong.
  - This means that *lying is always wrong in whatever circumstances that one finds oneself in.*
  - At the end of his article, Kant concludes that if an individual is directly asked by a would-be murderer for the whereabouts of the innocent victim he intends to kill, **then a moral wrong would be committed were she to lie to the murderer.**

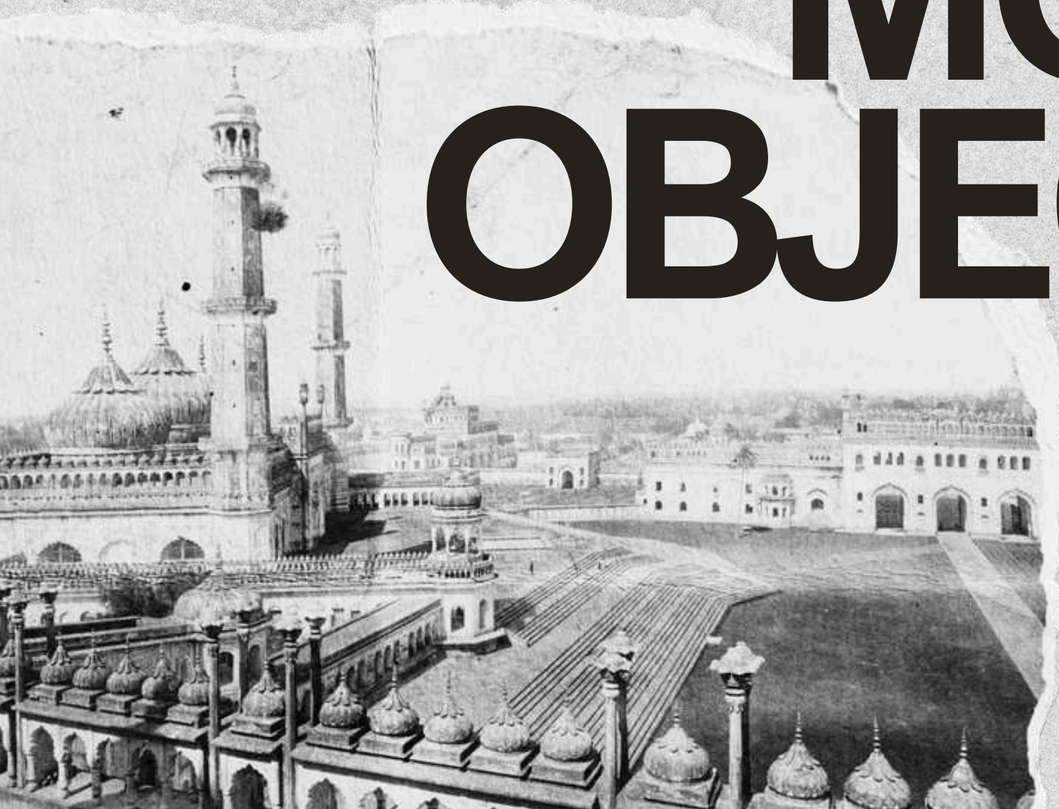
Theory	Claim	Example
Moral Subjectivism	Morality depends on personal/cultural beliefs.	“Stealing is wrong because *my society* says so.”
Moral Absolutism	Some moral rules can never be broken.	Lying is *always* wrong (Kant).
Moral Objectivism	Moral principles are objectively valid, but can be weighed against each other.	Truth-telling may be overridden to save a life.



Prima facie duties

- The objectivist agrees with the absolutist that moral principles have universal, objective validity.
- However, objectivists need not always agree that moral norms are necessarily exceptionless.
- For an objectivist, no moral duty has absolute weight or strict priority; each moral principle must be weighed against other moral principles.
- For greater understanding, the idea of prima facie duties would help.
  - According to William D. Ross, the originator of the idea, **prima facie duties** are duties that are binding only initially, or on "first appearance," so that they can be overridden by a more urgent duty.
  - Using this idea, one may state that there is a prima facie duty to tell the truth, but, as opposed to Kant, this duty can be overridden if a *more urgent duty, such as the duty to save a human life, presents itself*.

Arguments for MORAL OBJECTIVISM



1 Argument from Intuition

- **Normal people know that there are certain acts that are objectively immoral**: genocide, rape, slavery and many others.
  - By objectively immoral, it is understood to mean that these acts are wrong regardless of anyone's opinions about them.
  - However, if moral subjectivism is true, then no one can't criticize, say, Hitler for his genocide of the Jews since from Hitler's perspective, he's just doing the right thing.
- But normal people would retort that the wrongness of genocide does not depend on Hitler's view about the matter. There is a principle behind this presupposition, and it is this:
  - **(A) Genocide is objectively wrong, so no one should commit genocide.**

1 Argument from Intuition

(A)Genocide is objectively wrong, so no one should commit genocide.

- Clearly, Hitler does not believe in A. But as Louis Pojman remarked:
  - "Should that affect our confidence in the principle? Is it not more reasonable to infer that **Hitler is morally deficient, morally blind, ignorant, or irrational** than to suppose that his noncompliance is evidence against the truth of A?"

1 Argument from Intuition

- One may object that this argument *begs the question* since it is assuming that some acts are objectively immoral when that is what needs to be proved by the moral objectivist.

- The likes of Ted Bundy can as well say that they know that there are no objectively immoral actions, regardless of anyone's opinions about them.

- While it is implausible for anyone to meet someone who boldly claims that, we still cannot disregard its possibility.

- This scenario however does not prove that both positions have equal validity since moral objectivism is vastly more intuitive than moral relativism. Thus, it is the moral relativism that bears the burden of proof to show that his position is true or probable, but until the relativist can show that, we are rationally warranted to uphold moral objectivism even in the absence of any arguments.

2 The Argument from Epistemic Realism

- When a moral objectivist enters a discussion with a moral relativist, **both camps assume that there are objective epistemic duties that bind them.**

- Common **EPISTEMIC DUTIES** are these: *Do not misrepresent one's intellectual opponents, do not deliberately commit fallacies, do not deceive, and be honest in one's claims.*

- For the moral objectivist, it is not hard to integrate epistemic duties within his framework since he can easily argue that **epistemic duties are a subset of moral duties.**

- But in the case of the moral relativist, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to claim that there are epistemic duties since ***if morality is relative, there is no binding reason for anyone to obey epistemic duties.***

- Thus, it is more likely to think that moral objectivism is true given the universality of epistemic duties in the context of moral discussions.

3 The Argument from the Phenomenology of Moral Disagreement

- When people disagree about some moral issues, it seems that the **usual presupposition** on both sides is that *there is an objective truth about the matter that would settle the issue*.
  - Consider the issue of death penalty.
    - Those who are **against** it claim as one major reason the idea that the imperfection of the justice system may put someone to death who in actuality is really innocent.
      - Furthermore, they appeal to the moral idea that it is always unjust to punish someone innocent to death, and they take this as an objective moral fact in which even their opponents are expected to agree.
    - Meanwhile, those who are in **favor** of the death penalty may have as one major reason the idea that the only proportionate penalty to terribly heinous crimes is death, and they also take this as an objective moral fact in which even their opponents are expected to agree.

3 The Argument from the Phenomenology of Moral Disagreement

- In both cases, both sides rely on assumptions that they take to be objective moral facts, and that it is these facts that are assumed to have the power to persuade the other camp of one's position.

- There would seem to be no point in arguing for one's ethical position *if there is no way by which both parties can come to some sort of agreement predicated on an intersubjective reality that should be rationally convincing for everyone.*

4 The Argument from the Moral Responsibility and Accountability

- **Moral responsibility** means individuals are bound to fulfill their moral duties regardless of personal desires.
- **Moral accountability** allows us to praise good actions and condemn wrong ones. This only makes sense if universal moral standards exist.

- If morality were purely subjective or relative, people (like compulsive liars or cultures with harmful practices) *could never be legitimately criticized*.
- That would reduce morality to a **solipsistic view**—a private matter with no shared standards.
- In contrast, moral objectivism supports an **interpersonal view of morality**, where responsibility and accountability are central. Thus, ***morality seems to make sense only if it is objective.***

5 The Argument from the Nature of Moral Discourse

- **Moral discourse** refers to the way people talk about right and wrong in everyday life. Phrases like "You did the right thing" or questions such as "Is this wrong?" reveal that people assume moral standards that go beyond personal preferences or cultural practices.

Moral Praise and Condemnation

- When someone says, "You did the right thing," it carries **an expectation that if others were in the same situation and acted similarly, they too would deserve praise.**

- This shows that **moral judgments are meant to be universal and interpersonal**, and not simply expressions of one person's feelings.

5 The Argument from the Nature of Moral Discourse

Moral Questions

- When someone asks, “Is this wrong?” they **presuppose the existence of a moral standard that can judge the action**.
- This standard is assumed to be more than just one person’s opinion, ***it is something both the questioner and the listener should respect.***

Limitations of Relativism

- Moral relativism (whether individual or cultural) **cannot fully account for this kind of discourse.**
- If morality were purely subjective, moral praise or condemnation would not make sense, since each person or culture *would be bound only by their own standards.*
  - For example, if lying is acceptable to one person, others would have no grounds to criticize it.
  - Similarly, if a culture practices something harmful (e.g., slavery), outsiders could not condemn it without contradiction.

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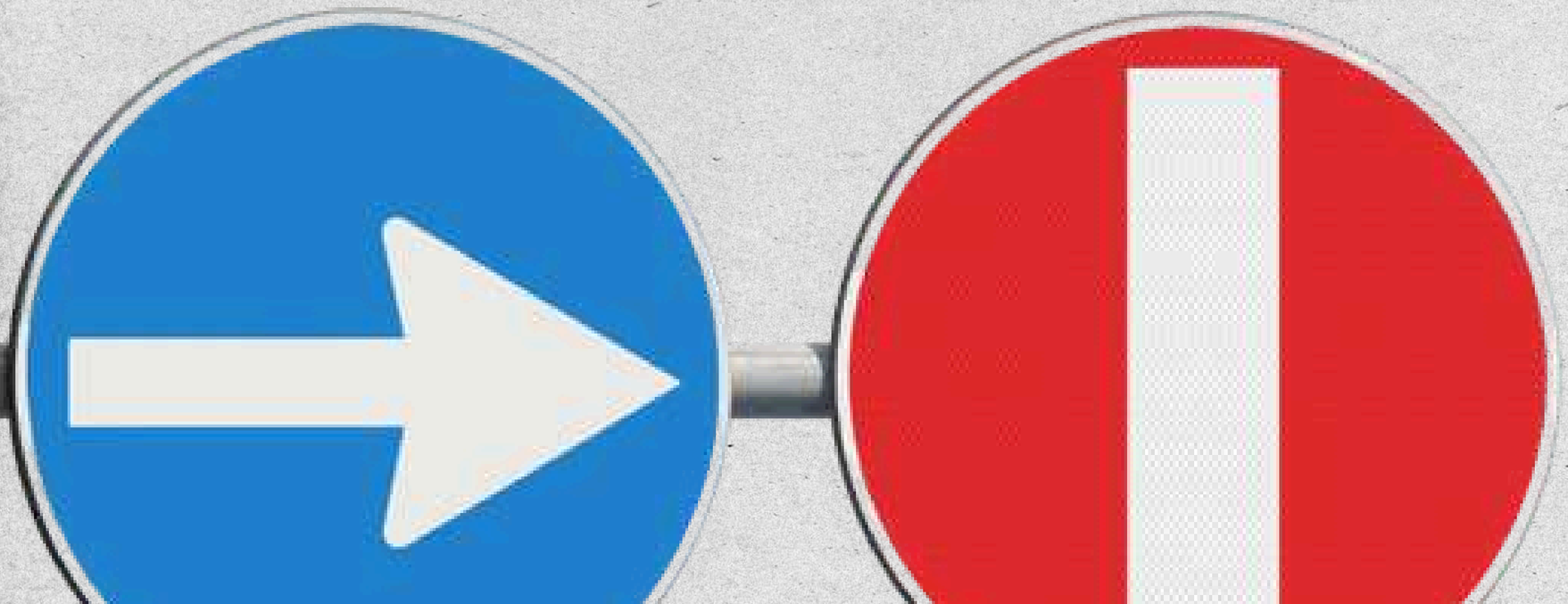
Objections to MORAL OBJECTIVISM

1 Moral Objectivism and Moral Dilemmas

- Critics argue that moral dilemmasundermine moral objectivism.
- Philosopher Saul Smilansky observed that **moral paradoxes threaten our ethical theories because they challenge the idea of consistent, universal moral truths.**



1 Moral Objectivism and Moral Dilemmas

Singer's Drowning Child Analogy

- **Peter Singer** argued that if we are morally obligated to save a drowning child (despite inconvenience like muddy clothes), then wealthy people are morally obligated to help the poor.
- This appeals to the universal value of **well-being.**
- Yet another universal value—**freedom**—says people also have the right to use their earnings as they see fit. Thus, a dilemma arises between well-being and freedom.

1 Moral Objectivism and Moral Dilemmas

Value Pluralism as a Solution

- Human beings ***recognize multiple universal values***: freedom, fairness, respect for persons, truth, and well-being.

- Sometimes these values collide, creating dilemmas where it's impossible to fully honor all values at once.
  - For instance, helping the drowning child represents well-being, while keeping one's wealth represents freedom.

1 Moral Objectivism and Moral Dilemmas

Dilemmas Don’t Disprove Objectivism

- The existence of dilemmas doesn’t mean morality is subjective. Instead, it shows that ***objective values can conflict.***

- Even if we can’t satisfy both in every situation, each value—like freedom and well-being—remains universally valid. The real challenge is deciding which value should take priority in a given context, yet this debate still assumes objective standards.

Moral Objectivism and Epistemology

- A major challenge to **moral objectivism** is the epistemological **problem**:
  - *If morality exists independently of human opinion, then how can we know what is right and wrong?*

- By contrast, **moral relativists** avoid this difficulty because the subjectivist determines morality based on personal beliefs, and the **conventionalist** relies on social consensus (though the latter still faces complications when societies disagree).

Moral Objectivism and Epistemology

- To address this issue, moral objectivists turn to **moral epistemology**, the study of whether and how humans can know moral truths.

- One common answer is through **conscience or moral intuition.**
  - Philosopher C. Stephen Evans defines ***conscience*** *as a faculty that enables humans to directly perceive the rightness or wrongness of actions without further inference*.

  - This idea is defended in **ethical intuitionism,** which holds that people can immediately recognize certain moral truths.

    - For example, causing unnecessary harm is wrong or that honesty and promise-keeping are obligatory.

    - Cross-cultural evidence supports this, since many moral duties (truthfulness, hospitality, keeping promises) are widely upheld across human societies.

Moral Objectivism and Epistemology

- However, *moral intuitions are not infallible.*
    - Evans warns that social and cultural contexts can distort moral perception.
        - For instance, in ancient Greece slavery was accepted, which likely clouded intuitions about human dignity. Still, this distortion is not absolute. *While Aristotle defended slavery, his teacher Plato opposed it, showing that individuals can resist cultural bias*.
- **Education and reflection** can also help refine one's moral sense.

Moral Objectivism and Epistemology

- In any case, we might end this chapter by a quote from one of the ablest defenders of moral objectivism, the philosopher David O. Brink. He observed that:
    - *In moral argument and deliberation, it seems, **we are trying to discover what sorts of things are valuable, praiseworthy, or obligatory.** We recognize moral requirements, and if we are sensitive to moral requirements, they constrain our will and our conduct. We think people can be morally mistaken and some people are morally more perceptive than others*
- Thus, moral objectivists defend ***the possibility of moral knowledge by appealing to moral intuition and conscience***, while recognizing that these faculties can be influenced by culture but not wholly determined by it.
- This supports the claim that morality is objective and not merely a matter of opinion or convention.