

Lecture 3

Moral Relativism (and the risks of excessive tolerance)
vs Moral Objectivism





In 2022, Microsoft disrupted Russian cyberattacks targeting Ukraine

- “We recently observed attacks targeting Ukrainian entities from Strontium, a Russian GRU-connected actor we have tracked for years. This week, we were able to disrupt some of Strontium’s attacks on targets in Ukraine.” Microsoft (2022)
- A moral relativist may ask: “Why interfere? Isn’t it all a matter of perspective? Russia and the global South tend to support Russia or be neutral, much of the West supports Ukraine. Your view clearly depends on where you are from”

According to the moral relativist

- Moral relativist – “It’s naïve to believe in universal moral truths!”
- From the point of view of each culture, each is right and there’s no other impartial/neutral/objective point of view”
- A: “From the point of view of Ukraine, Russia is invading, so a cyber attack on Russia is justified”
- B: “From the point of view of Russia, Ukraine is getting friendly with NATO, so a military operation and a cyber attack on Ukraine are justified”
- The moral relativist will say each claim is correct *in its own cultural environment*. To them morality is relative to one’s culture, social group, or even purely personal point of view. So for the relativist:
 - **1. Many contrasting views can all be correct without contradiction**
 - **2. We can’t judge *across* cultures.**



Relativism may affect your decision-making at work

Example: Dark patterns in ATMs

- \$50 commission to get 200 Euro? I said no.
- After being forced to go through many screens where the CANCEL button was on the left, one last screen placed a “Go ahead / I agree” option on the left, and I must have accidentally clicked it.
- A relativist would say:
 - a) From the point of view of the user, clearly the menus should be designed to assist you in getting what you want. **Dark patterns are unethical**
 - B) From the point of view of the bank, it’s the user’s responsibility to read very carefully before clicking that they agree, even if they have to click through 20 menus. **Dark patterns are ethical.**
- The relativist: “See? There’s no single objective/perspective-free moral truth”



Objection:

“Moral relativism sounds like a very extreme view.

Does it even exist?

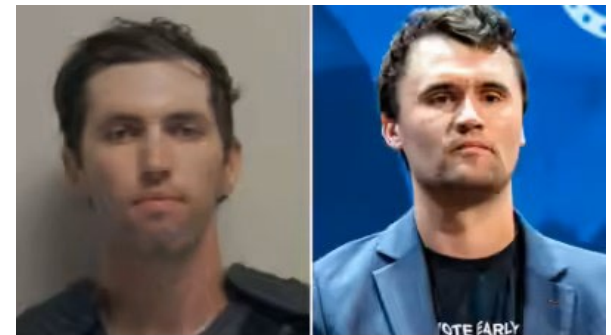
Is it a strawman?”

Even though full-on moral relativists may be rare, relativist thought and speech is real and a problem

- Arguments based on moral relativism do exist and are quite common. Some examples:
 1. **Content Moderation:**
A global social media platform must decide whether to censor political speech. In some countries, far right speech is harmful propaganda; in others, it's seen as free expression. “Facebook is just following American values of freedom!”
 2. **Hacking for Justice:**
A group of ethical hackers exposes a corrupt government by leaking classified documents. They are hailed as heroes in some countries but labeled as traitors by those loyal to the regime. “It’s all a matter of point of view!”
 3. **Algorithmic Fairness:**
An AI system uses different data sets for job applications in two countries. In one country, race and gender-based affirmative action policies are mandated and accepted to fix generational systemic racism and sexism; in the other, considering gender and race is seen as enforcing discrimination. “Meritocracy and family values are the standard in my country!”

Objection: “But isn’t hypermoralism, leading to polarization, the real problem?”

- Some will argue: Isn’t relativism about having a lot of tolerance? Isn’t tolerance fantastic and precisely what we need to fix polarization? Live and let live!
- No, both **hypermoralism** (demanding purity and perfect alignment, no tolerance) and **moral relativism** (too much tolerance) are serious problems and both connect to polarization.
- We need to get tolerance *just right*
- Let’s look at some examples of both hypermoralism and relativism
- Why mention politics? Because clearly political views affect ethical views on what is fair regarding freedoms, privacy, how we treat others



Political views affect moral opinions



- **Hypermoralism on the left**
- **Puritanical hypermoralistic *intolerance***
- “Be with us 100% now or be cancelled”. Issues: black and white views on Palestine and trans rights (genuine issues but taken to an extreme of required purity and compliance)
- Example: If you say that “Israel has a right to defend itself” I won’t talk to you again (trying to corner others into black and white positions)
- **Relativist arguments to muddy the waters:**
- 1. Russia is just doing what the US does in South America. If it’s OK for the US, it’s OK for Russia
- 2. Afghanistan is thriving under the Taliban. We may not understand but they are doing their own thing

- **Hypermoralism on the right**

- **Puritanical hypermoralistic *intolerance*** – “The radical left is destroying family values and eroding freedoms. Ban abortion, stop white racism, stop European cultural and racial decay. Stop the Great Replacement. Long live ICE”
- **Relativist arguments** to muddy the waters –
 - 1. Trump: there are “very fine people on both sides”
 - 2. Elon Musk stating that “The ‘Everyone is Hitler’ attack is sooo tired” in response to his alleged “Nazi salute”.
- Context: Musk supports far-right parties in Europe and several far-right political figures: Tommy Robinson (former leader of English Defence League) and Geert Wilders (Party for Freedom). Musk: “Only AfD can save Germany”

Hypermoralism and relativism connect

Saying: “You have no tolerance” is a way to enforce hypermoralism on freedom of speech



Moral relativism is a popular view sometimes summarized as: “It’s wrong to judge!” (other cultures)



- **Note:** keep in mind that most relativists can consistently judge others, just **not judge *outside their culture***. It’s only in the most extreme version of relativism (culture of one – “I live by my own rules!”) that a relativist won’t judge anyone at all.
- A few reasons individuals often invoke for refusing to judge others:
 - Our judgements of others are fallible
 - There is disagreement about the norms of conventional morality
 - We cannot fully know someone else’s motivations for acting
 - We should be tolerant
 - Those who judge are not perfect themselves! So it’s hypocritical to judge
- Some conclude: “We should never judge others!”
- **This may seem like a tempting view, but it is wrong**

Progress so far and what we'll discuss today

- Lecture 1
- Q: So is there is genuine moral action?
- **A: Yes.**
- Lecture 2
- Q: How to determine what to do, then? Convention/tradition?
- **A: No. Convention can get it wrong.**
- Lecture 3
- Q: OK, I won't assume the status quo is always correct, but there are no objective moral standards! Moral norms are always cultural. So the best we can do is not judge other cultures!
- **A: Wrong. We must reject relativism. It's our moral duty to judge (i.e. morally *evaluate* – and possibly do something about it).**
- **Crucial – the simple act of rejecting relativism (therefore concluding that at least some values are objective and apply to all in the same situation) *still* won't tell us what to do!**

“We shouldn’t judge!” – one source of this dangerous idea in Western culture – Judeo-Christian values

- Note that this is not a criticism of Judeo-Christian values as a whole! Just these points – if taken *literally*, they are wrong
- Don’t judge / Judge like you want to be judged
- “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
- Don’t judge others as you’re not perfect / Judge yourself first
- “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

Appeal to Hypocrisy/No moral high ground – fallacious arguments

- The idea that one needs **moral high ground** to acquire the authority to make true claims about morality is mistaken
- This is based on an **appeal to hypocrisy**: “You are hypocritical, therefore your claim can be ignored”
- But “appeal to hypocrisy” is a well understood *fallacy* (a logically invalid argument)
- Why? Because these are two entirely distinct and independent issues (i.e. they don’t affect each other):
- A) whether an action is morally wrong or not
- B) whether the person making a moral claim/judgement acts in accordance with their own judgement

The absurdity of the moral high ground argument

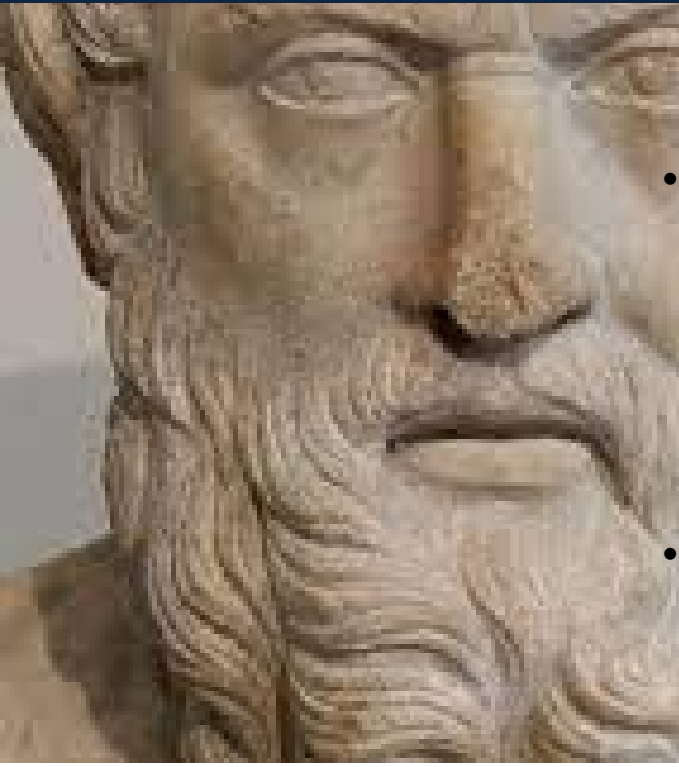
- Now let's **pretend** for a moment that appeal to hypocrisy is NOT a fallacy and consider the odd logical consequences (*reductio ad absurdum*)
- **Peter killed a stranger, John, to access his crypto wallet to buy a laptop**
- **Hannah comments: “It was wrong to murder someone merely for the purpose of taking their property”**
- If appeal to hypocrisy were not a fallacy, we would not be able to know whether Hannah is correct *without knowing more about her*. Has she stolen? Has she ever lied? Has she killed anyone in the past? If she is not pure of heart, then she has no right to say that murder is wrong!
- If you have lied once in your life (and everyone has!), then you can never say that lying is wrong, etc..

Why we *should* judge

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- If by criticizing “judgement” it is meant that ***harsh judgement and/or hypocritical judgement is problematic***, it’s a good point in one sense – it could be said it’s unfair to 1. criticize others *too harshly* and 2. you should look at your own behaviour ***too***.
 - But **the *presence of hypocrisy doesn’t by itself undermine judgement*** (i.e. moral evaluation of actions).
 - Yes, there is a contradiction if Hannah both:
 - A) steals money and murders people
 - B) judges that stealing is wrong and murder is horrible
 - The solution, however, is not to say that Hannah must stop judging! The judging is the part she is doing **right!**

The challenge of cultural relativism – James Rachels



- 2.1 It's an empirical [and undisputed] fact that different cultures have different moral codes
- Historian Herodotus noted that Darius, a king of ancient Persia, was intrigued by the fact that the Callatians ate the bodies of their dead, while the Greeks practiced cremation and saw this was the natural way to dispose of the dead.
- Darius invited people from each group and asked what would it take for them to do what the others did. Both were shocked by the cultural practices of the other and didn't even want to hear about it.
- This is an obvious *empirical* fact: **"Different cultures have different moral codes"**



Cultural relativism (i.e. normative moral relativism)

- 2.2 Cultural Relativism
- What can we conclude from this claim: “Different cultures have different moral codes”?
- According to some, knowing this is all we need to understand morality. The idea of universal truth in morality is therefore a myth.
- Sociologist William Graham Sumner wrote in 1906: “The “right” way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down. The tradition is its own warrant. It is not held subject to verification by experience. The notion of right is in the folkways. [...] When we come to the folkways we are at the end of our analysis”
- **Right: Graham Sumner**



Rachels identifies six separate claims

- 1. Different societies have different moral codes (an empirical fact we can observe)
 - 2. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal code better than another
 - 3. The moral code of our own society has no special status, it is merely one among many
 - 4. There is no universal truth in ethics – there are no moral truths that hold for all peoples at all times
 - 5. The moral code of a society determines what is right in that society
 - 6. It is arrogance to try to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should be tolerant.
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- **1 – Descriptive moral relativism – True. It's empirically verifiable. Not all cultures have the exact same values**
 - **2-6 – Normative moral relativism – A mistake with serious consequences**

2.3 The cultural differences argument

- Consider the following argument – Rachels calls it the **cultural differences argument**
- Premise: It's an obvious empirical fact that different societies have different moral codes
- Conclusion: Therefore, there is no objective truth in morality. Moral codes are a matter of opinion, and opinions vary!
- Rachels: the argument is not valid!
- Why? There is a move from “is” to “ought”. **“No ought from is!”**. It is not because people do believe it that they ought to believe it (e.g. it is not because some people do believe the Earth is flat that it follows that they should believe it)
- Right: James Rachels



2.4 The consequences of taking cultural relativism seriously

- Rachels: Even though the cultural differences argument is invalid, it is logically possible that the conclusion - cultural relativism - might still be true, for other reasons.
- Rachels: So let's see - what would it be like if cultural relativism *were* true? (*reductio ad absurdum*)
- 1. We could not criticize the customs of other societies (including slavery, stoning, sexism, racism, FGM, any form of oppression)
- 2. We could know whether actions are right or wrong by merely consulting the standards of our own society (so when apartheid was considered right in South Africa, it was right)
- 3. **There could be no moral progress**, as every moral value is fine as long as supported by the dominant social view
- Relativist: “Was apartheid considered ethical in South Africa? Yes, so racial segregation was ethical back then. Now it isn't, but it may be ethical again one day – all it takes is for people to believe it's ethical”

2.5 There is less disagreement than it seems

- It seems strange that Hindus in India don't eat cows. But why don't they eat cows? Because they believe in reincarnation, so the cow could be someone's dead grandmother. Would you eat your grandmother?
- It sounds like we just disagree whether the cow can be someone's grandmother (note this now becomes just a disagreement about empirical claims, rather than one that is truly about moral values)
- Rachels' conclusion: moral disagreement is often for the most part superficial – about empirical fact only



2.6 All cultures have some values in common

- Rachels: for instance, we should expect that all cultural groups will protect their infants because:
 - 1. Infants are helpless and cannot survive
 - 2. If a group did not take care of their young, the group would die out
 - 3. Therefore, any existing group will be found to take care of their young.
- Other examples supporting Rachels' view:
 - Imagine a society where no value is placed on truth-telling.
 - Imagine a society in which there is no loyalty to friends.
 - Imagine a society in which there is no prohibition of murder.
- Unlikely! If it did happen, would it be a good society?
- **This suggests moral values are connected to correct solutions to social problems. This grounds the values in objective fact.**

2.7 Judging a cultural practice to be undesirable

- Rachels on female genital mutilation: “We may ask whether the practice promotes or hinders the welfare of the people whose lives are affected by it”
- Rachels: This question may have an answer that could be objectively right or wrong, and not just a matter of personal opinion.
- Note: this conclusion is commonly misinterpreted by students. Getting your values right is not just a matter of carefully considering the facts objectively:
 - A) We don’t necessarily share the *same* definition of “welfare”. Welfare is a complex concept including both empirical and value components
 - B) Someone could potentially accept the objective medical (empirical) facts but insist that FGM is physically harmful but still promotes moral welfare
- Note that Rachels correctly points out that welfare is not just an empirical concept: “the welfare of its members is a value internal to all viable cultures.” (good job from Rachels trying to argue he’s not building an invalid **ought from is** argument)

Objectivism

Belief in universal values

Paul

$$A + B$$

Sarah

$$B + E$$

Michael



Who is objective vs biased?

Who is right about their values?

We don't know. We just know that Paul and Sarah are objectivists, Michael is a relativist

Mythbusting

Being a moral objectivist ≠ being objective

- To be a moral objectivist is to subscribe to a philosophical position – moral objectivism = to say that moral relativism is wrong
- To say that someone is “objective” is instead to describe their psychology – they are impartial, unbiased (e.g. like a good judge, referee). That says nothing about their position on the universality of moral values.
- Moral objectivists can be biased, and they often are influenced by their culture or group. For instance, UAW accused Tesla of using digital surveillance in a way that is coercive, and the company is accused of discouraging unionization (Elon Musk is against all unions everywhere). Both seem to be objectivists, but are these unbiased/objective parties? Probably not.
- Moral objectivists don't necessarily know what is right. They are correct about objectivism itself (i.e. relativism is wrong). Objectivism tells us nothing about someone's actual values. Both Hitler and Gandhi were moral objectivists.

Rachels - Many are *still* reluctant to criticize...

- They might say:
 1. We should not interfere with the cultural customs of others (post-colonial guilt)
 2. We should be tolerant
 3. We should not express contempt for another culture
- Objections to the above:
 1. It is possible to judge without interfering (e.g. enforcing laws, enacting sanctions)
 2. We should be tolerant, but should we be tolerant of all religions and all cultures equally?
 3. We don't have to reject a religion or culture as a whole - just individual practices that should be changed (thoughtful members of religions and cultures actually do this themselves)

Revisions + absolutism

Three Important
distinctions for
today
(handout in
lecture 3 folder)

- Descriptive Ethical Relativism vs. Normative Ethical Relativism
- (Normative) Ethical Relativism vs. (Normative) Ethical Objectivism
- Ethical Objectivism vs. Ethical Absolutism
- Note: in this as in most contexts in this course, “ethical”=“moral”
- Ethical Relativism means the same as Moral Relativism

We must distinguish **empirical claims about norms** vs. **normative claims about what norms *should* be**

- **Out of the two arguments, which is an empirical claim about norms, which is a normative claim about norms?**
- “*I personally consider* hacking wrong, as I’m Canadian, but if you don’t live in Canada do whatever your culture says is right”
- “Europeans consider that earning money from phishing and hacking is morally OK”
- **Q: Is it consistent with objectivism to be *influenced* by their culture or are objectivists impartial?**
- A: Someone being an objectivist says nothing of their impartiality. They may or may not be impartial.
- Example – A son of two members of the KKK says: “Racism is fun and everyone around the world should be as racist as possible”

A further distinction: Objectivism vs Absolutism

- **Myth – Objectivists are those who follow hard rules/principles – e.g. “Don’t lie”**
- **Not true, because objectivists can be absolutist (Kantians) and non-absolutist (e.g. utilitarians, Aristotelians)**
- Pojman: "Moral objectivism: There is a fact of the matter as to whether any given action is morally permissible or impermissible: a fact of the matter that does not depend solely on social custom or individual acceptance.
- Pojman on Moral absolutism: There is at least one principle that ought never to be violated."
- **Objectivism of the absolutist type is then – What is right and wrong is objectively so AND can be captured in principles (e.g. sentence-like commandments such as “It is wrong to lie”)**

Objectivist or relativist? Objective or biased?

- Michael is a white supremacist and believes all programmers should be white
- Michael is probably a moral objectivist (universalist claim). We may find out he was influenced by his racist friends - so he is not (psychologically) objective despite being an objectivist
- Helen's father worked hard for Nintendo writing valuable copy for their site during an unpaid internship. He signed an NDA, so he could never put this on his resume. Helen says that this is unfair and should happen to no one anywhere
- It's philosophically an objectivist position, although perhaps Helen is not (psychologically) objective, since it's her father...

Objectivist or relativist? Objective or biased?

- Riley has always worked for Amazon: “If you work for Amazon, you need to fully support whatever it does”
- Likely relativist and probably psychologically biased/not objective.
- Note:
 - 1. Don’t assume that loyalty is intrinsically wrong/relativist
 - 2. Blind loyalty turns out to be a form of relativism (blind loyalty to gang/Mafia family/company/co-workers).
- Video game workers in Edmonton voted to unionize for the first time in Canada (2022). “This is essential to resist an exploitative industry and matches Canadian values”
- Probably relativist. Is it OK to exploit as long as you don’t do it in Canada?

Objectivist claim? Right or Wrong?

- **No matter where you work and where you are from, it's always OK to steal from a big rich company, but wrong if it's a small startup**
- Objectivist claim that responds to circumstances. Wrong
- **If a client lends you his laptop and there's personal information there, it's ethical to see it and share it if your company says they don't care.**
- Relativist insofar as what's right seems to depend on the company's views. Wrong
- **I can plant a virus in a client's computer to get information on a competitor, as I'm serving my company and therefore I'm being loyal. Any programmer should be willing to do this for their company.**
- Primarily objectivist on the surface, but *blind* loyalty *at all costs* ends up collapsing into relativism. Wrong.

“Circumstantialism” is not relativism

- Don't confuse a resistance to absolutism (therefore stating that context/circumstances do matter) with normative relativism (cultural context is *all* that matters).
- The engineer who uses different bridge designs in different situations is rejecting absolutism, but he's not a relativist about physics. Physics is universal and objective, but implementation depends on circumstances
- Circumstantialism in ethics (example): in some circumstances it's moral to lie



Should Microsoft have disrupted cyberattacks against Ukraine?

- A: “Russia cannot accept NATO to encroach on Ukraine, in its sphere of influence, just like the US didn’t accept soviet ICBMs in Cuba either! Therefore, to be ethical Microsoft should have also stopped all cyberattacks, rather than side with the West”
- B: “Microsoft was right to protect the West but we should understand that Kaspersky labs also has the right to protect Russia, and possibly attack Ukraine. Each must protect their own, as a matter of loyalty.”
- C: “I’m Canadian, so of course I support Microsoft’s actions. If I were Russian I would think differently.”
- D: “Every cyber attack is wrong, regardless of who does it, or why”
- Which of these positions is relativist, objectivist, absolutist? (or a mix) Why?

Can I be an objectivist *and* still value tolerance?

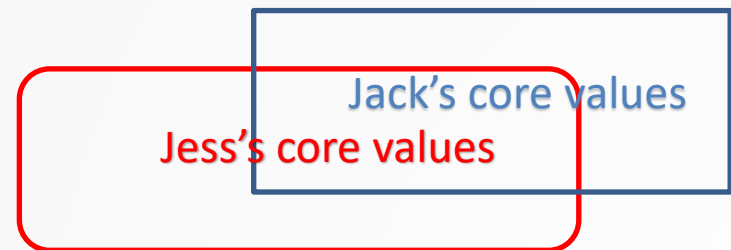
Yes!

- Many who claim to be normative ethical relativists *falsely* believe that relativism is a logical consequence of the value of **tolerance**.
- It's not. Should we be tolerant of **everything**? No.
- Each objectivist seems to commit to some core group of values (not necessarily the right ones, and they may or may not be shared with others) where tolerance seems inappropriate (e.g. sexual harassment, fraud, corruption, murder). Only outside this core tolerance is meaningful.
- In practice, those who claim to be normative ethical relativists are not consistent. They will probably judge the actions of Hitler or Jeffrey Dahmer



Final clarification on objectivism and core values

- **Some students mistakenly say, after reading Rachels' paper, that we all share the same “core values”, or that all objectivists share the same “core values”. This is not what he means.** People often disagree about what is ethical, and objectivists disagree too.
- 1. The concept of “core values” is primarily meant to show that tolerance is only fully meaningful in the context of objectivism and outside of *some* set of values **each** objectivist considers non-negotiable – each person has their own core values.
- 2. We can then also add that for the most part we even tend to agree on many of what these non-negotiable core values are (even most relativists are in practice not as flexible as they claim to be)



Are moral values objectively/universally valid?

"Yes, at least some are"

"None are. Values are only valid in relation to the culture/group/individual from which the judging is done. Cross-cultural judgment is impossible"

OBJ

REL

ABS NON-ABS

ABS NON-ABS

e.g. Kant
"Don't lie"
(not responsive to
circumstances)

e.g. Utilitarians
"Lie if it maximizes utility"
(responsive to circumstances)

"Canadians
should never lie"
(not responsive
to circumstances)

"Canadians value
honesty but consider
other values" (responsive
to circumstances)

Non-absolutists – respond to the circumstances of the action

Relativists – respond to the cultural context of who is doing the judging