

relativism

Is ethics in the eye of the beholder?



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a basic distinction

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how the world *is*.

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- If they are, there would be little point to ethical debate and discussion.

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Statements about values express claims about how things *should be*.

- The big question is whether statements about values are just a matter of opinion.
- If they are, there would be little point to ethical debate and discussion.
- If they are not, and they are not statements of fact what *are* they?

relativism



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- Value judgments are personal, rooted in our sense of identity.

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- They are absorbed from our cultural environment.

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According to relativism...

- Value judgments are personal, rooted in our sense of identity.
- They are absorbed from our cultural environment.
- Like cultural norms regarding food, manners and personal affairs they are not subject to critical evaluation.

relativism



There is no disputing taste.

-- David Hume

relativism



There is no disputing taste.

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QUESTION: are ethical norms like taste in food, subject to disagreement with no way of settling disputes? Either you like sushi or you don't...

a note on ethical theories



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- Makes certain *assumptions*: we have to start *somewhere*.

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Every theory we will look at:

- Makes certain **assumptions**: we have to start *somewhere*.
- Has **implications**: *if it is true*, then we have to accept other stuff too.

a note on ethical theories



Every theory we will look at:

- Makes certain **assumptions**: we have to start *somewhere*.
- Has **implications**: *if it is true*, then we have to accept other stuff too.
- Requires support in an **argument**: none are *obvious* even if they might seem believable at first glance.

implications of relativism

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If relativism is true...

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If relativism is true...

- There are no moral absolutes.

implications of relativism

If relativism is true...

- There are no moral absolutes.

But this implies that there is nothing, no matter how repugnant it seems, that can truly be called evil, as long as *somebody* thinks of it as acceptable.

implications of relativism

If relativism is true...

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If relativism is true...

- Moral progress makes no sense.

implications of relativism

If relativism is true...

- Moral progress makes no sense.

Since progress assumes that there is a standard to compare one practice or belief with another and relativism denies the existence of any independent standards of moral evaluation, things can never get *better* they can only be *different*.

implications of relativism

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- We cannot really discuss ethical issues we people we disagree with.

implications of relativism

If relativism is true...

- We cannot really discuss ethical issues we people we disagree with.

If there is no common framework for discussion, we must live in morally distinct universes and can only talk past each other.

