

Transcript

Ethical relativism

Let's look at what is commonly called ethical relativism. You may have heard of the old saying, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. So if ever you were to visit Rome, you might like to adopt aspects of their lifestyle, like riding a scooter or enjoying long lunches.

We know that different cultures have different ways of behaving and seeing the world. Some researchers have mapped out these distinctive features and the way they might relate to business, health, or other aspects of our lives.

But what about ethics? What if different values led to different ideas of what is right and wrong? The values we hold are shaped by our national culture, our upbringing, and our organisational culture, among other things. But can we say that what we think is right for us to do is, in fact, right?

Is right and wrong simply about individual or cultural preferences? Is it all relative? Most ethicists would say no. While we accept that people can and do have different values and beliefs and that the situation you are in will always matter when resolving an ethical dilemma, we also know that ethical thinking involves evaluating an action or decision as right or wrong.

If there is a potential for someone to be harmed by an action or decision, we need to think it through. We need to ask ourselves, how does this value or practice work for people in that society? Even scientists can disagree over scientific facts, but they can still evaluate which set of facts and theories best apply to the world. That's why people no longer believe the Earth is flat.

There are value differences across different cultures, and for the most part, we should acknowledge this. Most ethicists agree that there are some values and beliefs that are more or less held across the globe. These include norms about killing or injuring others and being truthful when communicating. If this weren't the case, societies would not function.

If you think about practices such as slavery, which sadly continue today, we can evaluate this practice and say it is wrong for a number of reasons. Yet a few centuries ago, when slavery was tied to colonial business practices in the United Kingdom, Spain, and elsewhere, it was argued that slavery was essential for the economy.

So different values were in tension, but we can still weigh up which value, profits and economic growth versus the liberty and rights of fellow humans, holds the most weight ethically.

The dominant social values should never be the only thing we consider when evaluating whether something is right or wrong. We are all part of a social order, and our interests are intertwined with those of others. We want our societies to not just function well, but to flourish. Think about this next time you are faced with an ethical dilemma.

So instead of adopting an ethical relativist position, we need to become ethical pluralists and carefully consider a range of frameworks and arguments before deciding if something is right or wrong.