

MORAL RELATIVISM

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy (Ethics, Meta-ethics), Developmental Psychology

1. Core Definition

Moral relativism is a broad philosophical and psychological concept asserting that moral judgments, beliefs, and values are not universally true or false but rather relative to the context from which they arise. This context may be a culture, a society, a historical period, or an individual perspective. In its most fundamental sense, moral relativism challenges the notion of objective, invariant ethical truths that hold across all times and places, suggesting instead that the moral quality of an action--its rightness or wrongness--is contingent upon prevailing social norms or individual interpretation. This stands in stark contrast to moral absolutism or objectivism, which maintains that certain moral principles are eternal, immutable, and universally applicable regardless of specific circumstances or cultural differences.

While the philosophical debate on moral relativism focuses heavily on the truth-aptness of moral statements (whether they can be objectively true), developmental psychology, particularly following the work of Jean Piaget, employs the term to describe a specific stage in a child's ethical maturation. In this psychological context, **moral relativism** represents the sophisticated cognitive capacity to move beyond rigid, rule-based moral evaluations. It involves the ability to consider the actor's intentions, the context of the situation, and any potential mitigating or extenuating circumstances when judging the morality of a particular act. This developmental achievement signifies a shift from viewing rules as sacred and unchangeable to understanding them as flexible social agreements designed to serve human cooperation and well-being.

The core distinction lies in the acknowledgment that moral standards are not imposed externally by a transcendent authority but are rather generated internally or socially. For the relativist, when two different societies hold conflicting moral views (e.g., regarding the permissibility of polygamy or the use of corporal punishment), neither view is objectively superior or definitively correct; both are simply valid within their respective frameworks. Understanding this nuanced position requires recognizing that moral claims function descriptively--detailing what people believe is right--or normatively--suggesting what people ought to do within a given framework--but rarely, if ever, objectively defining universal moral reality.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The roots of moral relativism stretch back to ancient Greek philosophy, most notably associated with the Sophists. Protagoras' famous dictum, "Man is the measure of all things: of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not," is often interpreted as an early assertion of cognitive and moral relativity. This foundational idea posits that truth, including moral truth, is

determined by human perception and convention rather than an external, fixed reality. However, this early articulation was largely eclipsed in Western philosophy for centuries by the dominance of Platonic, Aristotelian, and later, monotheistic traditions that favored moral objectivism and divine command theory, asserting universal moral laws.

The concept gained significant traction during the Enlightenment and the subsequent rise of anthropology in the 19th and 20th centuries. As researchers encountered vastly different cultural practices across the globe, the idea that one set of moral rules could govern all human societies became increasingly difficult to maintain empirically. Anthropologists like Franz Boas and his students championed the concept of **cultural relativism**, arguing that a culture must be understood on its own terms, a position that strongly supports the moral relativist viewpoint by highlighting the immense diversity and internal consistency of differing ethical systems. This empirical observation provided the sociological and historical evidence necessary to challenge traditional moral foundations.

In the realm of psychology, the development of moral relativism was systemized by Jean Piaget in his seminal work, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932). Piaget argued that children progress through distinct stages of moral reasoning, moving from a rigid morality of constraint (moral realism or heteronomy) to a more flexible morality of cooperation (moral relativism or autonomy). This developmental perspective provided a framework for understanding how individuals, rather than just societies, internalize and construct moral meaning. Later, Lawrence Kohlberg built upon Piaget's foundation, proposing his own stages of moral development, which further detailed the ascent toward principled, self-governed moral reasoning, although Kohlberg ultimately aimed for a more universalist endpoint than pure relativism might suggest.

3. Key Characteristics and Conceptual Distinctions

To analyze moral relativism effectively, philosophers typically distinguish between several key types, each carrying different implications for ethics and meta-ethics. These distinctions are crucial because they differentiate between merely observing moral differences and actively asserting that those differences preclude universal truth. The three primary forms are descriptive relativism, meta-ethical relativism, and normative relativism.

Descriptive Moral Relativism (DMR) is the empirical observation that different societies or cultures hold fundamentally different moral codes. This is a claim of fact: people disagree about what is right and wrong, and these disagreements are profound and widespread. DMR does not make any claim about the truth or falsity of these varying beliefs; it simply catalogs the diversity of moral practices and judgments observed globally. This form is widely accepted by sociologists and anthropologists and serves as the empirical basis upon which stronger forms of relativism are built.

Meta-ethical Moral Relativism (MMR) is a far stronger philosophical thesis. It asserts that there

are no objective, universally valid moral truths, and therefore, when moral disagreements arise, there is no single, context-independent standard by which to judge which party is correct. According to MMR, moral statements are true or false only relative to a specific cultural or individual standpoint. If Culture A believes X is wrong and Culture B believes X is right, MMR maintains that both statements are true within their respective cultural frameworks, making objective truth impossible. This form directly engages with meta-ethics, the study of the nature of moral judgment.

Normative Moral Relativism (NMR) is the prescriptive claim that because there are no universal moral standards, we ought not to judge or interfere with the moral practices of other cultures. It is the belief that moral tolerance is a universal requirement, even though the premise denies universal requirements. This is often the most controversial form because it attempts to derive a universal rule (tolerance) from a relativist premise, leading to potential logical inconsistencies. NMR is the practical application of the relativist viewpoint, urging restraint and non-intervention in foreign moral spheres.

4. Moral Relativism in Developmental Psychology

As outlined by Jean Piaget, the shift toward **moral relativism** is the hallmark of the second major stage of moral development, known as the Morality of Cooperation, or **Moral Autonomy**. This stage typically emerges around the age of ten or eleven, succeeding the earlier stage of Moral Realism (or Heteronomy). The progression is marked by a transition from a unilateral respect for adult authority and external rules to a mutual respect among peers, where rules are viewed as flexible, self-imposed instruments for achieving justice and fairness within a community.

The key cognitive ability that defines this developmental moral relativism is the capacity for perspective-taking and the consideration of intent. For example, a child operating under moral realism judges two scenarios--one where a child accidentally breaks ten cups while helping, and another where a child intentionally breaks one cup while stealing--by the magnitude of the material damage (ten cups is worse). The morally relativistic child, however, considers the underlying purpose or motivation: the child who broke ten cups had a good intention (helping), while the child who broke one cup had a bad intention (stealing). The relativistic judgment correctly identifies the intentional act of stealing as morally worse, demonstrating the ability to contextualize the behavior.

This developmental shift fundamentally changes the child's relationship with rules and punishment. In the autonomous stage, children understand that punishment should not merely be expiatory (punishment designed to "make up" for the wrong) but rather retributive (proportional to the offense) and, ideally, rehabilitative, linking the punishment logically to the crime itself. Furthermore, they realize that rules are not eternal dictates handed down from above but are social contracts that can be altered or renegotiated if all parties agree. This move toward flexible moral application

and contextual judgment is what Piaget terms **moral relativism**, distinguishing it from the rigid absolutism of earlier childhood.

5. Applications and Societal Impact

The application of moral relativism extends beyond abstract philosophical debate, deeply influencing fields such as law, politics, and cross-cultural dialogue. In international relations, understanding and acknowledging descriptive relativism is crucial for diplomacy and conflict resolution. Policy makers must recognize that different nations operate under fundamentally different ethical paradigms regarding human rights, sovereignty, and economic justice, making purely universalist approaches often ineffective or counterproductive without cultural accommodation.

In the realm of law and jurisprudence, the concept of mitigating and extenuating circumstances--which allows for reduced culpability based on context, intent, or background--is itself an institutionalized form of moral relativism. Modern legal systems rarely apply a pure absolutist standard (e.g., "killing is always murder"); rather, they classify acts based on intent (premeditation, manslaughter, self-defense), acknowledging that the moral quality of the act fundamentally changes depending on the surrounding context. This legal complexity reflects the mature, relativistic moral reasoning achieved in developmental psychology.

Furthermore, moral relativism has had a profound impact on social movements that challenge dominant cultural narratives. By asserting that the moral standards of the ruling group are merely one set of standards among many--rather than objective truth--relativism provides a framework for marginalized groups to legitimize their own divergent ethical systems and values. It opens up spaces for dialogue about what is 'normal' or 'correct,' facilitating the recognition of diversity and the promotion of tolerance, which are often cited as the primary positive outcomes of a relativist perspective on ethics.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its explanatory power regarding cultural diversity and psychological development, moral relativism faces persistent and powerful criticisms, largely directed at its meta-ethical form (MMR). The most common philosophical critique is the so-called "self-refutation" or **inconsistency argument**. If moral relativism is true, it means that no moral statement is universally valid. However, the statement "Moral relativism is true" is itself a moral or meta-ethical claim. If it is claimed to be universally true, then relativism is false. If it is only claimed to be true relative to one person or culture, then it loses its power as a significant philosophical thesis applicable to all.

A second major criticism addresses the practical consequences, often referred to as the "**indifference objection**." Critics argue that if all moral systems are equally valid, there is no basis

to criticize practices commonly deemed atrocious, such as genocide, slavery, or extreme human rights violations, when they occur within a specific cultural context. Relativism seems to strip ethical discourse of its critical function, leading to moral paralysis or indifference. This concern is particularly acute for those who believe that there must be some minimum set of universally protective human rights, regardless of cultural framework.

Finally, critics often challenge the empirical basis of descriptive relativism, arguing that while practices differ widely (e.g., dietary customs, marriage rituals), the deep, fundamental values underlying those practices (e.g., preservation of life, care for offspring, avoidance of unnecessary suffering) are often universally shared. This position, sometimes called **Moral Objectivism** or Moral Realism, suggests that superficial differences mask underlying ethical universals, meaning the disagreement is not truly about morality itself but about how universal moral principles are applied given specific environmental or historical constraints.

7. Further Reading

[Moral Relativism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Moral Relativism \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development](#)

[Meta-ethics](#)