

# Moral relativism hume and kant essay example

[Family](#), [Children](#)



While humanity has solved the problems of providing running water and electricity, the issues of morality remain sticky wickets for societies to figure out - and even for individuals to puzzle out on their own. While in many cases it might be easier, at least for the collective, for all individuals in a particular social group to share the same morals, just about every attempt at creating a morally homogenous society, at either end of the spectrum, has failed. Whether it was the Puritans (or the modern day Taliban) creating a theocracy and setting up a system of laws that govern every aspect of morality, or the nineteenth-century utopians (or the hippies of the 1970's), establishing communes in which just about any sort of morality was allowed, as long as one was willing to do one's part toward maintaining the grounds, the societies were not able to remain cohesive for long. The simple fact is that different people develop different moral matrices. The points where these matrices intersect can create strife in a situation where moral homogeneity is expected. The other option, of course, is moral relativism - less frightening than homogeneity because it allows freedom of choice. However, it is also more frightening, because it makes the individual responsible for his own decisions, instead of allowing him to blame the general social milieu for his own immorality. Because of the views of Hume and Kant about morality, their positions on relativism provide an interesting insight into the differences between their own cultural contexts and our own.

Moral relativism includes a number of different concepts, but in general, they tend to hew to these main arguments: morality is relative to one or multiple frameworks. Any framework is a particular set of beliefs or standards. These standards can be held by an individual, or by a larger group, such as a

society, a religion, or a culture (Miller 354). While there are different types of moral relativism, they generally involve individuals or groups who subscribe to different moral frameworks. There may be some commonalities between the two groups, but there will also be some areas of difference. The intersection of those two cultural groups can lead to misunderstandings when the different cultural groups have different moral answers to the same question.

For David Hume, ethical and moral decisions come from more affective impulses, which makes moral relativism a problematic concept. He wrote that “ a man naturally loves his children better than his nephews, his nephews better than his cousins, his cousins better than strangers, where everything else is equal”(Hales 436). By claiming that this is a natural state, Hume contradicts some of the notions of relativism. After all, if there are ethical tenets that are a part of humanity as a whole, then the idea of relativism goes out the window. The example of nepotism would be one instance of value here. Many corporations and organizations in capitalist countries have policies in place to guard against nepotism, so that spouses and relatives cannot work in the same company. The purpose of this is to ensure that decision-making is based on merit rather than on favoritism. The policies are not in place because the people who work in the companies are immoral; rather, they are in place so that the people who are in charge of hiring decisions do not follow their own natural instinct, which is to give preference to those who are related to them when making decisions about hiring or advancement. In organizations that do not have these policies in place, when organizational leaders make decisions that end up benefiting

their own relatives (or even their friends), there is generally an outcry against something that is considered to be unfair. This actually works both ways, harming the person who is hired as well. Many school districts, for example, do not have nepotism clauses, and so it is not uncommon to hear about a school superintendent's children, nieces or nephews being hired to work as teachers when they are prepared to enter careers. This leads to a lot of grumbling within the school district, as the fact that a superintendent's child can get a new teaching position when many other deserving applicants did not even get a shot can lead to the assumption that the child of the superintendent is not qualified as a professional - the only reason for the hiring, the assumption goes, is that child's connection to the superintendent. If the child is actually qualified, this becomes an assumption that damages the child's professional reputation.

One of the most exciting tenets for communism, at least in its early stages, was the emphasis on merit, and how performance would be the basis for all privilege, rather than class status or any other method of determining standing. However, as time went by, in the experiment of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, one of the common complaints had to do with the cronyism and nepotism that took place within the Communist Party. Given the clear-cut dichotomy between capitalism and communism, not only as economic systems but also as ethical value systems, the fact that there would be one ethical problem that appeared in both systems shows that it is impossible to say that morals are fully relative. According to Hume, "our sense of duty always follows the common and natural course of our passions" (Hales 436). If the human passions are intrinsic responses to

existence, it would be incorrect to suggest that passions are relative. Even among cultures that offer such different responses to stress – some cultures offering a more stoic response to downturns while others offer a more affective answer – the passions of anger, jealousy and love burn within all of us, as Hume suggests. The strength with which they burn may vary, but they are present for all of us. The end result is an absolute basis, rather than a relative one, from which all moral decisions ultimately spring. The restrictions that society leads us to place on those impulses can vary, depending on our culture, but if morals are basic ideas of right and wrong, then it is problematic, from Hume's point of view, to say that they are relative.

Looking at this from a Kantian point of view also makes the idea of moral relativism problematic. As Taennsjoe indicates, it is worth questioning how to “distinguish moral (socially constituted) facts from other kinds of (socially constituted) facts, such as facts concerning etiquette, the existing legal situation, and so forth”(128). In other words, how is the question of whether or not insider trading is wrong different from the arrangement of forks, knives and spoons around a charger and plate? Both, from a relativistic standpoint, are placed on top of the individual much like a yoke is placed on an ox, and the individual is simply expected to obey what he hears. When one sits down to a formal dinner, one is expected to lift the coffee cup with a pinky extended – this is a socially expected rule in formal meal etiquette. However, one can certainly make the argument that etiquette decisions are far more arbitrary than moral ones. While etiquette rules may follow the imperative for being considerate of others, and for providing the most

respectful outcome for a situation, they are also not the rules that will ultimately determine the fate of the human race. Even if future First Ladies make the faux pas of touching the Queen of England before the Queen has touched her, the destiny of humanity will not come into question. That has not stopped the British government from developing an entire hierarchy of etiquette rules for the Royal Family, but it also means that one can violate the rules without experiencing any true suffering (especially now that Henry VIII is no longer the king).

Morals, though, are a different sort of category. It can be argued that moral considerations are the only type of questions that actually suit Kant's notion of the categorical norm. Returning to the question of setting the dinner table, even though one may attend a series of cotillion classes that teaches the proper layout of the dessert spoon at a banquet, there is no universal law that mandates that the spoon lie above the charger, running parallel to the edge of the table. This is proven by the fact that there are parts of the world where a nod means "No," and other parts of the world where a nod means "Yes." A belch is good manners in some parts of the world, indicating that one has enjoyed the meal that one has just consumed. In other parts of the world, belches are to be stifled. When it comes to morals, though, one can incorporate the word "ought" into discussions, because there are worthy reasons why a particular action is morally wrong.

Let's return for a minute to the question of insider trading. This involves financial transactions made by people who have inside knowledge about a situation that is not publicly known. Perhaps a state government is about to

approve the construction of a major highway through a very rural area. People who know about this approval beforehand can snap up the land at a bargain, so they can sell it to developers at a premium after the highway is announced. This can also happen within companies who know they are about to report some financially surprising news. People on the inside can communicate that information to others, and the resulting trades are conducted before the public announcement is made – and the insiders benefit. Because there is an element of unfairness to this sort of transaction, it would awaken universal condemnation; in just about every country, the financial markets include a regulation against this sort of insider trading. The fact that this is seen as morally wrong on a global level indicates that moral relativism, again, has some extreme limits.

Moral relativism is one of the calling cards of the 21st century, as the move toward individualism has many people claiming their right to be left alone and to live as they please, operating solely on the basis of their own moral compasses. Hume and Kant would both take issue with this approach to ethics, claiming that the moral impulse comes from a place deep within our personalities, not accessible to socialization on any important level.

## **Works Cited**

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