

Defining and understanding moral relativism philosophy essay

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



As technology continues to make the world a 'flatter' place, people from different backgrounds come into contact with each other much more often than before; be it through long distance communication, or through direct interaction enabled by modern transportation. With cultural diversity comes conflict, especially in the case of morals, which for many are deep seeded, and highly emotional topics. This has necessitated a system of arbitration for situations in which these conflicts arise. One such system is Moral Relativism.

Moral Relativism is based on the idea that different cultures and people may have varying viewpoints on the morality of a given circumstance.

Furthermore, it stipulates that none of these viewpoints is inherently better than any other, so this discord cannot be resolved. Therefore, it can be surmised that there is no absolute standard for right or wrong, and there is no 'correct' judgment of the morality of a specific event.

There are several benefits of Moral Relativism, one of which is that it can promote tolerance of different moral standards. To understand how this works, we must first examine Ethnocentrism, which could be considered the antithesis of Moral Relativism. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own way of doing things is perfect, and that every other methodology is inherently inferior. A prime example of Ethnocentrism in action was colonialism, where Europeans sought to replace all other cultures with their own in an attempt to 'educate' and 'modernize' the rest of the world.

Moral Relativism, on the other hand, is the belief that there is no correct moral scale, and that no one system of beliefs can be said to be any better

than another. Because of this, we must make accommodations for all viewpoints on an issue equally, and not discount an opinion just because it varies from our own moral code.

One of the early proponents of moral relativism was David Hume. (1771 - 1776) Hume argued that a person's understanding of the world around them is based entirely off of what they have experienced in life, as they cannot have knowledge that they have not gained through experience, be it in the classroom or otherwise. Because no two people have the exact same experiences in life, everyone will view every event slightly differently. This difference in viewpoint will lead to differing emotional responses that have been learned through the experiences. He further concludes that all moral judgments are based on emotion, not on logic, as we will often make decisions against our better judgment even though we know logically that they might be mistaken. Therefore, since we all have differing experiences, we will have differing emotional responses, and therefore difference judgments as to the morality of a situation. Since no two people will have the same judgment of a situation, there is no 'majority' and no way to decide that one view is better than another, as ultimately they are all arbitrary.

Because of this, reconciliation of varying views on an issue isn't absolutely necessary. If people simply accept that differing moral judgments are to be expected, we can avoid conflict by simply removing the expectation that there is a moral norm.

Ruth Benedict also had an interesting take on Moral Relativism, contending that there was in fact no such thing as morals, but simply that what we perceive to be moral guidelines are simply cultural guidelines. Until recent history, we have been so cut off from other cultures that it was feasible to live in a relatively homogeneous cultural group. Living in such a group would give the impression that there were absolute standards for right and wrong, as theoretically every member would adhere to the same customs. However, as we begin to come in contact with more and more diverse cultures, it becomes apparent that the theoretically inherent and absolute guidelines as to what was acceptable, known as 'morals' were nothing more than a societal construction. This discovery led to a need to reconcile these differences, for which Ruth suggested Moral Relativism.

There are however, several arguments against moral relativism as well. Some of the primary opposition to moral relativism comes from the religious sector. Large portions of the Catholic Church, including Pope Benedict XVI, have denounced moral relativism for causing the current moral decline of Europe. The argument behind this is that the replacement of Christian morals with a more adaptive and fluid moral model that is present in most modern societies has led to sexual deviance and the breakdown of the modern family.

Additionally, Bhikkhu Bodhi expresses concern that if there is no absolute standard for morality, that there is no way to hold people morally responsible for their actions. Because anyone can arbitrarily define their own moral code, they could justify any action by claiming that it was adherent to their moral

code, or more specifically, altering their moral code so as to allow for the actions that they took to be acceptable. This would effectively remove all moral restraints, and people would begin to simply do whatever they wanted without regard for its morality. This would negate the very purpose of having morality in the first place, and effectively destroy any and all moral standards.

Ibn Warraq and Eddie Tabash offer a more philosophical rebuttal to Moral Relativism, arguing that it is useless because it does not offer any means for moral arbitration, but simply discourages discourse. One of the main assumptions of Moral Relativism is that we cannot reconcile our differences. If we believe this, then we can conclude that there is no reason to attempt reconciliation, as it will surely be met with failure. If we cannot hope to reconcile our differences, then we have no choice but to default to our own moral standards as being correct. This means that Moral Relativism is self contradicting in some of its finer details. Thus, while in theory Moral Relativism would promote tolerance of different beliefs, in practice this seems to actually promote ethnocentrism, instead of tolerance.

Thus, while moral relativism may initially appear to be a simple solution to resolving moral differences, when we take a deeper look at the ideas and methods behind it, it becomes apparent that, when followed to the letter, Moral Relativism lacks the practicality necessary to be used on an everyday basis. Therefore, complete adherence to moral relativism cannot be advised, though many of us would do well to learn from some of its ideals, such as tolerance of other belief systems.