The Foundations of Morality:

Divine Command Theory
Moral Reasoning
Ethical Relativism
Natural Law Arguments
Universalism
What’s the problem?

- Can one ground one’s moral values on anything that would be true for all people at all times, everywhere?

- Can an ethical system be universally true, independent of cultural practices or beliefs?

- Actor David Tennant
What about the “Will of God?”

- How do we know what God’s will may be?
- There are many conceptions of God and different people claim to know God’s will but their claims often conflict – how do we know who is right?
- Should we follow laws because they are believed to come from God or because they are good? Doesn’t the acceptance of God’s will depend in part on a belief in God’s goodness? If this is so, then how do we define goodness without begging the question?
Can’t we rely on our conscience?

- If one argues that the conscience is God-given then we run into the same problems raised in the previous slide.
- If one does not argue that it is God-given, then one must determine what makes the commands of one’s conscience good.
- (Note: We will discuss David Hume’s use of the conscience and sympathy as a sufficient grounding soon)
Why is autonomy critical to ethics?

“I expect you all to be independent, innovative critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!”

Source: http://constructivismelt.wikispaces.com/file/view/thinkers_cartoon.jpg/334589238/273x293/thinkers_cartoon.jpg
Glossary:

- **Moral Realism**: There are universal moral truths – even if we have yet to discover them
- **Moral Pluralism**: The theory that there are many moral systems
- **Ethical Relativism**: There is no universal moral standard for right and wrong
  - **Cultural Ethical Relativism**: Morality is dependent on collective practice and preference
  - **Individual Ethical Relativism**: Morality is dependent on a person’s own experiences and value systems
- **Moral Isolationism**: One cannot understand another culture’s moral system if one is not a member of that culture – cultures are distinct and separable
Ethical Relativism: The Core Argument

(P1) What is considered morally right or wrong varies from society to society [diversity premise – cultural relativism/pluralism]

(P2) The Rightness or wrongness of act is determined by the society to which one belongs. [dependency premise – normative claim]

(C) Therefore, it follows that there are no absolute or objective moral principles that apply to all people and at all times.
Relativism: an Example

Herodotus –
“Custom is king.”

• Suggests that moral value is nothing over and above what one is used to.
HOW ARE YOU DOING ON YOUR NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS?
I DIDN'T MAKE ANY.

SEE, IN ORDER TO IMPROVE ONESelf, ONE MUST HAVE SOME IDEA OF WHAT'S 'GOOD.' THAT IMPLIES CERTAIN VALUES.

BUT AS WE ALL KNOW, VALUES ARE RELATIVE. EVERY SYSTEM OF BELIEF IS EQUALLY VALID AND WE NEED TO TOLERATE DIVERSITY. VIRTUE ISN'T 'BETTER' THAN VICE. IT'S JUST DIFFERENT.

I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN TOLERATE THAT MUCH TOLERANCE.
I REFUSE TO BE VICTIMIZED BY NOTIONS OF VIRTUOUS BEHAVIOR.
Relativism.2: Gilbert Harman

- P1) “Morality arises when a group of people reach an implicit agreement or come to a tacit understanding about their relations with one another.” (p501)
- P2) Moral judgements about the way someone ought to act can only be made in relation to this agreement
- P3) There are no logical requirements that these agreements be universal.

- C) There are no universal standards outside of these agreements by which we can judge behavior
Can Appeals to “Natural Law” Defeat Relativism?

• What is “Natural Law?”

Aquinas wrote that, “It is apparent that things prescribed by divine law are right, not only because they are put forth by law, but also because they are in accord with nature.” (p504)

Apotheosis of St. Thomas Aquinas, altarpiece by Francesco Traini, Encyclopedia Britannica
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John Corvino critiques 5 arguments against homosexuality based on natural law: How do each of these arguments fail?

1. What is unusual or abnormal is unnatural.
2. What is not practices by other animals is unnatural.
3. What does not proceed from innate desires is unnatural.
4. What violates an organ’s principal purpose is unnatural.
5. What is disgusting or offensive is unnatural.

A depiction of a Greek symposium from around 50 years before Plato’s birth. Fresco from the Tomb of the Diver. 475 BCE. Paestum Museum, Italy.
Problems with Ethical Relativism:

1. Problem with moral isolationism – not true that cultures are distinctly isolated – increasing globalization spells decreasing isolation & increasing need to cooperate cross-culturally
Problems with Ethical Relativism:

2. One often belongs to more than one culture – North America, United States, Western United States, California, Northern California, Santa Cruz....
Problems with Ethical Relativism:

3. The theory doesn’t do it’s job – it does not and cannot guarantee tolerance – if no universal moral truths exist then tolerance cannot be universally valued

"... from a relativistic point of view there is no more reason to be tolerant than to be intolerant, and neither stance is objectively morally better than the other."

Problems with Ethical Relativism:

4. The argument often attempts to derive normative claims (how one ought to behave) from descriptive claims (how one does behave).

_Hume famously closes the section of the Treatise that argues against moral rationalism by observing that other systems of moral philosophy, proceeding in the ordinary way of reasoning, at some point make an unremarked transition from premises whose parts are linked only by “is” to conclusions whose parts are linked by “ought” (expressing a new relation) — a deduction that seems to Hume “altogether inconceivable” (T3.1.1.27). Attention to this transition would “subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv'd by reason.”_ (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
Problems with Ethical Relativism:

5. One cannot decry atrocities

Rare photo of Hiroshima after the atomic bomb.

6. One can make no sense of moral progress.

US President Lyndon Johnson looks on as Secretary of State Dean Rusk signs the Treaty for the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons on July 1, 1968. Photo Credit: Corbis/Getty
Universalism: A Rejection of Ethical Relativism

James Rachels argues that we have certain things in common; and as an example he argues that:

- Human infants are helpless and cannot survive if they are not given extensive care for a period of years.
- If a group did not care for its young, the young would not survive, and the older members of the group would die out.

Therefore, any cultural group that continues to exist must care for its young. Infants that are not cared for must be the exception rather than the rule.


- Similar reasoning shows that other values must be more or less universal. Two other possible examples of these universal, objective truths are truth telling and prohibitions on murder.