Ethical Relativism
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
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
More Glossary:

- **Moral Nihilism**: “the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy.” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

  - “What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. . . . For some time now our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end. . . .” – Nietzsche, *Will to Power*

- **Moral Skepticism**: It is an *epistemological* position - “a diverse collection of views that deny or raise doubts about various roles of reason in morality. Different versions of moral skepticism deny or doubt moral knowledge, justified moral belief, moral truth, moral facts or properties, and reasons to be moral.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

  - Ex: Pyrrho (c. 360—c. 270 B.C.E.) who taught “that every object of human knowledge involves uncertainty. Thus, he argued, it is impossible ever to arrive at the knowledge of truth.” (Diog. Laert, 58). (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

- **Subjectivism**: “Moral statements are just factual statements about the attitude the speaker holds on a particular issue.” (BBC Ethics Guide)

  - “The cry How beautiful! or How good! may be sincere, and it may be applauded, but it is never true. If sincere, such a cry is also never false, even if not re-echoed by the public conscience; because the public feeling that contradicts it can also never be true, but at best also sincere.” - George Santayana (Spanish-American Philosopher), Realms of Being (1942)
Ethical Relativism: the 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: the argument

**Herodotus** –

“Custom is king.”

- Suggests that moral value is nothing over and above what one is used to.
Relativism: the argument

- **Ruth Benedict** (1887-1948) supported her mentor’s claim that “cultures around the world should not be judged by the standards of Western civilization and that moral standards are not universal, but relative to each culture.”

  => Normative claims such as *primitive* or *abnormal* can be meaningful only with regards to one’s own cultural values and from another perspective the same practices may be viewed as traditional or normal.
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 its 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."


Photo: White nationalists storm the University of Virginia campus 8/12/17 ABC News
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.
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
Moral theories must give us the framework to reconcile differences:

Jay Wallace

- *The Moral Nexus: Toward a Relational Account*

Theory of Relational Normativity:

- “...morality may be thought of as a set of normative constraints on attitudes and actions that stem from the fact that we inhabit a common world together with other moral agents. More specifically...it may be thought of as a normative nexus that links us individually with each of the persons who might potentially be affected by what we do.”
Universalism: A Rejection of Ethical Relativism

James Rachels (Soft Universalism) 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.