

Ethics at a Glance

Moral Objectivism and Ethical Relativism

A central question in ethics is whether there are one or many valid ethical viewpoints. Attempts to answer this question reveal two fundamentally different assumptions from which moral reflection begins.

Moral objectivism holds that at least some moral principles and rules are objectively knowable on the basis of observation and human reasoning. The term **universalism** suggests that basic right and wrong is the same for everyone, while also allowing for some variation in individual circumstances and context. On the other hand, **ethical absolutism** is “the view that there exists an eternal and unchanging moral law that transcends the physical world and is the same for all people at all times and places” (Holmes, 1993). In this view, moral rightness and wrongness exist independent of human beings and unrelated to human emotions and thought. There is an absolute source of truth that transcends human rationality and choice.

Critics of this view point to human diversity and the difficulty of deriving a single, “true” morality that everyone would hold in common at all times and in all circumstances. The fact that beliefs and behaviors have changed over time in relation to individual preference and social approval suggests that an absolutist approach may ultimately conflict with observed human nature and behavior.

In sharp contrast with objectivism, subjective approaches deny the validity of objective moral principles and standards that can be applied universally. For example, **ethical relativism** holds that judgments about the rightness or wrongness of an act can legitimately vary between persons or cultures based on individual feelings (**subjectivism**) and specific social and cultural circumstances (**cultural relativism**). This view assumes that morality depends on a dual consideration of human nature and the human condition with specific social and cultural circumstances playing a role in determining moral beliefs and practices.

In extreme forms, subjectivist and relativist positions can be applied to conclude that what is true for others may not be true for me, rendering it impossible to evaluate the moral weight of even radically different actions. Critics of relativistic positions point to the failure of relativism to provide a workable means for resolving ethical issues since every action can be judged differently, depending on the actor’s point of view.

For more on moral objectivism and relativism see:

Ethics Update. Internet Philosophical Resources on Moral Relativism.
<http://ethics.sandiego.edu/theories/Relativism/>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Moral Relativism.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/>

Wikipedia. Moral Relativism. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_relativism

Wikipedia. Objectivism. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objective_morality