

Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 2, Ethical Relativism

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This is Dr. James S. Spiegel in his teaching on Christian Ethics. This is session 2, Ethical Relativism.

Hello, let's begin our look at major moral theories.

What we're going to do is begin with a look at ethical relativism. What I want to do is first establish that there is such a thing as moral truth and that moral values have objective truth values. In doing so, I want to critique this view, which is known as Ethical Relativism.

After we've done that, we'll begin looking at major moral theories, which are of an objectivist nature or that affirm the reality of moral truth. So we'll look at Ethical Relativism with the help of some material that I've drawn from James Rachel's contemporary classic book on ethics called *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. This book is actually the best-selling book in the history of philosophy.

I think it's in its ninth or tenth edition. And it's been used in so many classrooms and college ethics courses. That's why it's outsold even books like Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics.

So, I'll be drawing a bit from Rachel's discussion of Ethical Relativism. And it's interesting that Rachel's himself was an atheist. He's since died five, ten years ago, so I guess he's not an atheist anymore.

But he was an atheist but was still convinced that there is such a thing as moral truth. He rejected relativism. In fact, the overwhelming majority of philosophers, even if they are atheists or agnostics, believe in some sort of absolute moral truth, which is interesting to note.

There are very few relativists among philosophers and PhDs in ethics. So that tells you something about ethical relativism and its plausibility, even if atheists tend to reject this view. So, what is Ethical Relativism? Generally speaking, relativism is a view that there are no absolute moral values that apply at all times and in all places.

Now, there may be. There are, in fact, plenty of values that are relative. There are all sorts of practices that we would say are relative to the rightness or wrongness of a particular culture and its traditions, and so on. But Ethical Relativism says that all values are completely relative either to a culture or to one's individual preferences.

So, there is an important two-fold distinction between different kinds of relativism. There are cultural relativists and moral subjectivists. These are the two forms of relativism.

So, the cultural relativist says that moral values are always defined by a culture and its traditions or its folkways and mores. The moral subjectivist relativizes each individual, and it's a matter of individual preference as to whether a given thing is right or wrong. So, let's begin by looking at Cultural Relativism.

Now, this is a view that really came into prominence in the early and mid-20th century in large part because of advances that had been made in cultural anthropology. Scholars like Sumner and Benedict, Ruth Benedict, and others who were closely studying people groups from different parts of the world discovered that the way that they conduct themselves or the values that they have in many cases were very different than the practices and values that we hold here in North America or in the United States. That prompted a lot of scholars to consider the possibility that maybe there are different right and okay ways to behave, even when it comes to the things that we hold most dear, such as our views of marriage and killing and how we treat our children.

Some of our most fundamental beliefs are that there are people in other cultures who hold very different views and live their lives in very different ways. So that prompted a kind of skepticism for a lot of people that, hmm, maybe there is no absolute truth here. So, one way of analyzing what a particular moral theory affirms ultimately is to ask how they would define or translate a statement like X is good or X is bad or wrong.

What is really meant there? Here, we delve into something called meta-ethics, which analyzes the logic and meaning of moral terms, concepts, and statements. So, we will do a little bit of a meta-ethical analysis of each of these theories, beginning with cultural relativism. What does the cultural relativist think we're really saying when we call something good or bad or right or wrong or just or unjust? The cultural relativist says that a statement like X is good means that if X coheres with or fits with this culture's mores.

When we say something is bad, that's just a way of saying that it contradicts this culture's mores or received and preferred ways of doing things. So, if I say to a guest you should not burp at the table or if I say to my kid don't belch at the table. That's wrong.

Don't do that. That's bad. What that means is that's just something we don't do here.

We prefer that you do not belch at the table or expel gas flatulence at the table. Very rude, and we might say that's bad or bad it's a wrong thing to do. There are plenty of other things that we'd recognize as cultural preferences.

Certainly, belching in some cultures is considered a sign of gratitude or appreciation for a good meal. So, there's certainly relativity there. And we could say that about modes of dress and dancing.

Certainly, artistic styles. The way we set things up in terms of traffic laws. All sorts of little details of public behavior are relative to a culture.

And when you go visit another country you discover that. There are certain ways of hitching a ride, for example, that are practiced in different cultures that differ. You know we tend to do this.

Not that I'm a hitchhiker, but people who do hitchhike, you know, will stand on the side of the road and do that. Actually, it's not as widely practiced as it used to be. But that used to be the way to do it.

Put your thumb up like that. I learned a few years ago that if you do that in certain countries in Europe, people will be appalled. Why? Because that is basically soliciting people for sex, right? That thumbs-up gesture is vulgar for that reason.

So, there's relativity there. I said well, then, how do you hitch a ride? How do you indicate to motorists that you'd like to catch a ride somewhere? They say well, you do it like this. You take your index finger, and you point down.

So, I said well, that's good to know if I ever need to hitchhike in Europe. So there's certainly relativity that applies to all sorts of domains of human behavior, right? But the question is, is all human behavior culturally relative? Is it all like belching at the table or a hand gesture for hitchhiking? Is it all a matter of cultural preference? The cultural relativist says yes. The moral absolutist or objectivist says no.

There are certain universal values that are universally true for everyone. Certain things that are absolutely wrong no matter where or when you do them. There are certain other things that are absolutely good and right no matter where and when you do them.

So, what do we say to the cultural relativist? How can we respond? Well, first, let's consider the argument. The principal argument that cultural relativists use in defense of their view. Rachel calls it the cultural differences argument.

And if you encounter someone who is a cultural relativist and you ask them for a reason for their view, why is it that they hold the view that they hold, this is the

argument they're likely to give you. Some version of the cultural differences argument says first that different cultures have different moral codes. That there's a variety of moral codes across cultures.

And then, typically, they'll go right from there to the conclusion that there is no objective truth in morality. And a lot of times, it's expressed with a question. You know, how can you say that there's just one right way to live when people in other cultures do it very differently than you? How can you say that? That's kind of, I guess, a Socratic approach.

Just posing the argument in the form of a question. The assumption is that you're foolish to say that. That no one in their right mind would say there's just one right way to conduct yourself sexually, for example.

Or in terms of how we should treat people who are dying, who are in excruciating pain. Who are you to say there's just one right way to approach that situation? Or one right way to approach the abortion issue? And so on. So, the cultural differences argument basically moves from the plurality of beliefs and values to the conclusion that there is no one correct or true value when it comes to any particular moral issue.

Now, what do we just say to that? From a logical standpoint, this argument has a very basic flaw. And that is that plurality does not imply relativity. A plurality of views on anything does not imply that there's no one true view.

Just because people disagree about an issue, it doesn't follow from that that there is no single truth about that issue. Consider astronomy. In the history of astronomy, going back to the ancient pre-Socratic philosophers, there have been a variety of views.

Three major views. One is the flat earth theory, which states that the earth is flat and may be surrounded by water. What's that resting on? What is the earth, what is it founded on? You know, there were and have been and probably still are a number of theories that flat earthers propose there.

But the idea that the earth is flat is one position that's been held by a lot of people throughout history. Another view is the geocentric view, which is that the earth is floating in space and is orbited by the sun, as well as the various planets and stars. Then, the third view, the view that I hold and presumably you hold, is the heliocentrist view.

And that's the view that the earth is one of several planets that are orbiting the sun. And the sun is at the center of our solar system. These views are not compatible with one another.

You can't be a heliocentrist and a geocentrist at the same time or affirm flat earth and geocentrism one at the same time. You really have to choose. But there's a variety of views there.

To this day, in various cultures, and even in this one, there are people who are geocentrists as well as flat earthers. In fact, flat earth theory, I've noticed, has made a little bit of a comeback. And there are some prominent athletes and entertainers who are actually flat earth theorists today.

You can see bumper stickers. Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker that says, once you go flat, you never go back. There are people who seem to be highly intelligent, even well-known in this culture, who are flat earth theorists.

Now, does that mean that, therefore, there is no truth in the matter when it comes to astronomy and the position of the earth relative to all these heavenly bodies? Look, you have flat earthers and geocentrists and heliocentrists. Who's to say, who are you to say, that the sun is at the center of our solar system and the earth is revolving around the sun? Who are you to say? How would you answer that question? Hopefully, you will say, well, I'm somewhat educated about this theory. I understand basic physics and astronomy.

And I understand that overwhelmingly, in fact, I assume a certain unanimity among scientists who are experts in astronomy and cosmology, who can demonstrate empirically that this is the case, that heliocentrism is true. With all due respect to the flat earthers, with all due respect to the geocentrists, there is a truth of the matter that's based in good reasons and evidence that refutes their view. So we recognize that about astronomy.

We recognize that just because there's a plurality of views, it doesn't follow from that that there is no one truth. So, I think that's an important analogy here and something we can say to the cultural relativists when they push back and insist that the variety of views in ethics implies that there is no truth. We don't make that conclusion in astronomy.

Why should we say that here? Well, this is where the cultural relativists expand and strengthen their argument by adding a premise that, unlike science, there is no reliable method for determining objective truth and morality. We have resources, technology, and science to determine the truth about astronomy, biology, chemistry, and so on. We don't have that here.

Therefore, it's for this reason that we can conclude that there's no objective truth and morality. So that's a bit of an expanded, strengthened version of this cultural differences argument. What are we to say to that now? Surely, there is a difference,

isn't there, between the discovery of truth in science and the discovery of truth in ethics?

Maybe they're right. Maybe there is no method as there is in science for discovering moral truth. Well, in response to this improved version of the cultural differences argument, we can note that the argument is still invalid.

A valid argument is one where the premises imply the truth of the conclusion. If the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true. That is the definition of a valid argument.

But notice, when it comes to the cultural differences argument, even in this revised version of it, the conclusion does not follow. If we grant that different cultures have different moral codes, and they do, and we grant that there's no reliable method for determining objective truth and morality, and let's, for the sake of argument, grant that, does it follow that there is no objective truth in morality? Well, no, it doesn't. And again, we can go to the history of science to prove that.

In, say, the 7th century or the 12th century AD, was there a reliable method for ascertaining the truth in astronomy with regard to the Earth's place in the cosmos? No, there wasn't. You didn't have, we didn't have really powerful telescopes, or sufficiently powerful telescopes until the early modern period. And the means of exploring the universe were very limited, you know, say, 1,500 years ago, such that definitive conclusions could not be drawn about this question.

So, there was no reliable method for determining the truth of the matter regarding the Earth's place in the cosmos all those years ago. But, wasn't it still the case that the Earth was revolving around the Sun, spinning on its axis, right, revolving around the Sun, along with all these other planets, even though we didn't have a reliable method for determining the truth? Well, yes, it was. So, you can still have objective truth, in this case, in science, even when we lack a reliable method for determining that truth.

So that's an important distinction. It shows that this argument is invalid. But then we can add that there is a reliable method for ascertaining moral truth.

We can consult reason, human experience, and, if there is such a thing, a special revelation from God, which, as Christians, we believe is exactly what the scriptures are. The divinely inspired text guides us, especially in the realm of ethics, regarding how we ought to live before God, as well as communicating to us metaphysical truths about the ultimate nature of reality, the nature of God, as well as historical truths. But with the assistance of special revelation, the Old and New Testament books, and applying reason and experience carefully to those texts, we can come to well-justified conclusions about how we should live our lives.

So that's what we can say in response to the cultural relativist's best argument, which is the cultural differences argument. This is as good as it gets for cultural relativism and its defense. So, that argument fails.

But now, our critique of cultural relativism can go even further, and that is to note that there are many very problematic consequences of cultural relativism. And I think that these are the main reasons why you'd be hard-pressed to find an atheist philosopher who is a cultural relativist because these problems are so severe. And because, as C.S. Lewis notes in the opening pages of his classic work, *Mere Christianity*, no one really behaves like a cultural relativist or like any kind of relativist.

We hold people responsible for their wrongdoing. Nobody's a relativist while driving. Somebody cuts you off on the highway, right? You're going to make some sort of moral judgment, even if it's just quietly to yourself.

He should not have done that. He cut me off. That was wrong.

Or we learn about what certain people are doing in another culture far away. We say, wow, they do that? That's horrible. That's unjust.

That violates human rights, right? Even hardcore atheists will say that from time to time. And that reveals they're not really a relativist. They do believe in moral absolutes.

So here are some philosophical reasons to reject cultural relativism. And one is that it makes criticism of other societies' values impossible. If you are a cultural relativist, you can't critique what the Nazis did.

You can't critique what any genocidal people group has done in another culture. That's a different culture. According to cultural relativism, right and wrong are defined by the preferred values of one's particular culture.

I'm speaking from an American culture in the 21st century. Who am I to judge what the Nazis did 70 or 80 years ago? That is the conclusion you have to draw as a cultural relativist. You can't condemn the Nazis.

You can't condemn even the most bloodthirsty and genocidal actions of regimes in other cultures. It also makes moral progress impossible. If you're a cultural relativist, then there is no absolute standard according to which we can assess or judge progress or regress morally.

If you believe that our culture is improving, then there must be some sort of standard outside our culture that transcends our culture, according to which we can assess the relative merits, improvements, or degeneration of our culture's values. The whole notion of moral progress presupposes some sort of absolute transcendent standard for moral goodness. Connected with that is a further implication of cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism implies that all moral reformers are corrupt. Why? Moral reformers, like Martin Luther King, challenged certain aspects of the current cultural mores and values. Martin Luther King rightly challenged Jim Crow laws because they were racist.

Even though those laws were consistent with some prevailing mores in this culture, he recognized that they were wrong. He campaigned and protested against those and prevailed. We consider him a hero and someone who is a good moral reformer.

But if cultural relativism is true, you can't do that. If the only standards that we have to evaluate behaviors or moral reformers are the current cultural values, then by definition, what Martin Luther King was doing was wrong. He was challenging the cultural mores.

If you believe that Martin Luther King was a good moral reformer and even a moral hero, then that shows you're not a cultural relativist. You believe in moral absolutes. Martin Luther King made this very argument in a number of his writings and speeches that there is some higher moral law that he would say comes from God, is couched in the being of God somehow, according to which we can evaluate our current laws.

He was rightly confident that, at that time, we were practicing some immoral things with these Jim Crow laws. So, he was a moral hero. He wasn't corrupt.

The only way that we can make sense of his being a moral hero is by believing in moral absolutes and rejecting cultural relativism. So, we can put all this together and offer a kind of reduction to the absurdity argument against cultural relativism. If we assume that cultural relativism is true, then we have to conclude that Nazis were not absolutely wrong.

We have to conclude that not all moral reformers are corrupt, and we have to conclude that no moral progress is possible. However, any person with moral common sense would recognize all of those implications as unacceptable. The Nazis were absolutely wrong.

Moral progress is possible, but not all moral reformers are corrupt. So, that implies that the assumption here that cultural relativism is true must be false. Anything that implies absurdities or any falsehoods must itself be false.

So that's a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* argument against cultural relativism. Okay, so enough on cultural relativism. Let's talk about the other form of relativism, which is moral subjectivism.

One of the problems with cultural relativism is distinguishing when one culture begins, and another one ends. At what point does my current culture fade into another culture? We can talk about European culture or French culture as opposed to American culture, as opposed to German culture or Swedish culture. Different nations have different cultures, but within a particular culture or nation, you have subcultures.

In the United States, I just took a trip down to Texas, which is a somewhat different subculture than Indiana. I've been to California, Oregon, the East Coast, and all these different states. The subcultures are a little bit different.

I live in Indiana. I've noticed that there is a slightly different culture in northern Indiana than in southern Indiana, which is a little bit more like Kentucky. Northern Indiana is a little more like Michigan.

The line drawing is impossible or else endless. So, what counts as a culture? That is an open and difficult question. If we're going to properly understand cultural relativism, we've got a huge task on our hands.

It's probably an impossible one. The only clear line you can draw, it appears, is between individual people. It is clear where I end, and you begin.

That's setting aside the problem of conjoined twins. That makes distinguishing between individual people even more difficult. But for the most part, individual people are distinguished in terms of where one body begins and another one ends.

So, you have your values, and I have mine. The moral subjectivist says that's the solution. Each individual person has their own particular moral values.

So, they define what's right for them. You define what's right for you. I define what's right for me.

We do that in terms of individual preference. There you go. That's what is the best analysis of moral truth.

It's relative to each individual person. So, on this view, according to the moral subjectivist, X is good, which means it just means I like X. X is bad, which means I don't like it. That's certainly how we judge things when it comes to food.

I say, ah, brussels sprouts are bad. Ice cream is good. What do I mean by that? Well, I don't like brussels sprouts.

And I do like ice cream. Now, there are people who like brussel sprouts. And for them, I say, well, it's good for them.

I don't like it. Bad for me. So, the moral subjectivist is saying it's like that in the moral realm as well.

If you like it, then it's good for you. If you don't like it, then it's bad for you. Now, this is something that's very easy to determine, then.

One of the advantages of moral subjectivism is that it makes determining right from wrong pretty easy. So, euthanasia, war, death penalty, abortion. What's right and wrong with those particular questions? You just ask yourself, do I like the idea of, say, waging war on a country for this or that reason? Yes.

Okay. Well, then, it's right. Abortion on demand.

Do I like that or not? Sure. Okay. Then it's good.

It's right. You just ask yourself that question: do I like it? And that is the answer to the it is right or wrong. So moral subjectivists overcome certain problems that plague cultural relativism, but there are certain problems that remain. One of the big ones is that it provides no grounds or foundation for moral duty and obligation and rights, which most of us at least say we believe in, that there is such a thing as human rights and we have obligations.

But how can you make sense of that from the subjectivist view? What possible foundation or grounds could you have for obligation on this view? Another interesting consequence of moral subjectivism is it makes moral disagreements impossible. Again, if there's a parallel between moral judgments and judgments of taste about food, then it's clear you can't really have a substantive disagreement in ethics any more than we can, you know, have a disagreement about whether brussel sprouts taste good. You like the taste of brussel sprouts, I find them disgusting.

Would we ever argue about this? How foolish would it be to argue or debate whether brussel sprouts taste good? That would get us nowhere because we understand it's just a matter of taste. So, it goes into the moral realm for the subjectivist to be consistent; they would have to say that moral debate is absurd,

meaningless, and a waste of time. Why debate the issue of abortion when it's just a matter of you liking it and I don't like it? Why debate whether it's okay to factory farm animals? You don't like it, I do like it.

It's like ice cream, like brussel sprouts. So, we can't have any real moral disagreements according to moral subjectivism. That's the implication here.

But this is a problematic implication of their view because moral common sense tells us that real disagreement happens in ethics. That these disagreements we have are real and that they are worth debating. So, that's another problem with moral subjectivism.

Another absurd implication of this view is that if subjectivism is true, then we cannot condemn or praise anything absolutely. Why? Because, again, we're only describing our feelings and our preferences. And that includes the Nazi Holocaust.

That includes any genocidal behavior anywhere. That includes even torturing babies or rape and murder. I may not like these things.

I might be sickened by these behaviors. But if somebody else likes that, then as a subjectivist, I have to say, well, then that's right for them. And hopefully, the absurdity of that is clear.

Finally, a second absurd implication of moral subjectivism is that we cannot be mistaken about our moral judgments. If subjectivism is true, then so long as you're in touch with your own feelings and aware of what your own preferences are, then you know the moral truth about any particular issue whatsoever. You can't be mistaken.

And again, that contradicts moral common sense. I once held a different position on the abortion issue. Many years ago, I was pro-choice on that issue.

As I learned more about it, my view changed. And I became morally as well as politically pro-life on the abortion issue. Now, my view changed.

Moral common sense tells us that my view was either wrong and then I changed my view to the correct view or vice versa. Maybe I had the correct view, but I currently hold the wrong view. But that particular view, understanding that I was either mistaken before or I'm mistaken now, you can't make sense of that on the subjectivist view, which implies that you're never mistaken, even if you change yours from day to day.

Even if on every odd-numbered day, you're pro-life, and on every even-numbered day, you're pro-choice. You are correct every one of those days, so long as that is your preference that day. And if that's not absurd, it's hard to say what else could be.

So, we can be mistaken about our moral judgments. That also refutes moral subjectivism. So, moral subjectivism really isn't an advance on cultural relativism.

It's just as problematic, maybe even more so. And those are the two forms of ethical relativism, cultural relativism and moral subjectivism. So hopefully now we've refuted those two relativistic views.

Relativism generally doesn't work, and we need to, therefore, discover, if we can, some objectivist or absolutist moral theory that will make sense of our moral intuitions about all these issues, that will make sense of the concept of duty and rights and justice, that will give an adequate foundation for these things, that will make sense of our intuition and common-sense belief that moral disagreement is real, and it will also, a satisfactory theory will enable us to recognize that sometimes foreign cultures or groups or regimes and foreign cultures do things immorally even when their views are the prevailing ones within a culture. We need a moral theory that will account for all of these common-sense beliefs about morality. And so that's what will take us into our survey of the major moral theories, which we'll do next.

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