

## **Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 2, Ethical Relativism Resources from NotebookLM**

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

### **1. Abstract of Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 2, Ethical Relativism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL**

Dr. James S. Spiegel's "Christian Ethics, Session 2, Ethical Relativism" initiates a study of major moral theories by first examining and critiquing ethical relativism. The session distinguishes between cultural relativism and moral subjectivism, arguing against the notion that moral truths are merely cultural constructs or individual preferences. Through logical counterarguments and highlighting problematic implications, Spiegel contends for the existence of objective moral truth. He uses analogies from science and appeals to common moral intuitions to demonstrate the flaws in relativistic viewpoints. Ultimately, the lecture sets the stage for exploring objectivist moral theories.

**2. 23 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of  
Dr. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 2 – Double click icon to  
play in Windows media player or go to the  
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link  
there (Theology → Apologetics → Christian Ethics).**



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### 3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 2, Ethical Relativism

#### Briefing Document: Ethical Relativism Critique

**Overview:** This document summarizes Dr. James S. Spiegel's critique of ethical relativism, specifically focusing on cultural relativism and moral subjectivism. Spiegel argues for the existence of objective moral truth and presents several logical and practical problems with relativistic viewpoints. He draws upon James Rachels' work and common-sense moral intuitions to support his arguments.

#### Main Themes and Important Ideas:

##### 1. Defining Ethical Relativism and its Forms:

- Spiegel begins by stating his intention to establish the existence of objective moral truth by critiquing ethical relativism. He defines relativism as the view that "there are no absolute moral values that apply at all times and in all places." (p. 1)
- He distinguishes between two main forms of ethical relativism:
- **Cultural Relativism:** Moral values are defined solely by a culture's traditions, folkways, and mores. "The cultural relativist says that moral values are always defined by a culture and its traditions or its folkways and mores." (p. 2) This view gained prominence due to anthropological studies highlighting diverse cultural practices.
- **Moral Subjectivism:** Moral values are relative to each individual's preferences. "The moral subjectivist relativizes each individual, and it's a matter of individual preference as to whether a given thing is right or wrong." (p. 2)

##### 2. Critiquing Cultural Relativism:

- **The Cultural Differences Argument and its Flaw:** Spiegel addresses the primary argument for cultural relativism, which posits that because different cultures have different moral codes, there is no objective truth in morality. He argues that this argument is logically flawed: "plurality does not imply relativity. A plurality of views on anything does not imply that there's no one true view." (p. 4) He uses the analogy of differing astronomical views (flat earth, geocentric, heliocentric) to illustrate that disagreement doesn't negate the existence of objective truth.

- **The Claim of No Reliable Method for Determining Moral Truth:** Cultural relativists strengthen their argument by claiming that unlike science, there's no reliable method for determining objective moral truth. Spiegel counters this by stating that even when a reliable method is lacking, objective truth can still exist (again using the historical example of astronomy). Furthermore, he argues that methods for ascertaining moral truth *do* exist: "We can consult reason, human experience, and, if there is such a thing, a special revelation from God..." (p. 6)
- **Problematic Consequences of Cultural Relativism:** Spiegel outlines several significant negative implications:
  - **Impossibility of Criticizing Other Societies' Values:** If morality is culture-bound, then judging the actions of other cultures (e.g., Nazi Germany) becomes impossible. "If you are a cultural relativist, you can't critique what the Nazis did." (p. 7)
  - **Impossibility of Moral Progress:** The concept of moral progress requires an external standard against which to measure improvement or regression. Cultural relativism lacks such a standard. "If you believe that our culture is improving, then there must be some sort of standard outside our culture that transcends our culture..." (p. 8)
  - **Moral Reformers are Corrupt:** If current cultural mores are the sole standard, then moral reformers who challenge those mores (e.g., Martin Luther King Jr.) are by definition wrong. Spiegel argues that our recognition of moral reformers as heroes contradicts cultural relativism.
  - **Reductio ad Absurdum:** Spiegel presents a "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... 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." (p. 8-9)

### 3. Critiquing Moral Subjectivism:

- **Defining Moral Subjectivism:** This view posits that moral truth is determined by individual preference. "X is good, which means it just means I like X. X is bad, which means I don't like it." (p. 10)

- **Problems with Moral Subjectivism: No Foundation for Moral Duty, Obligation, and Rights:** Subjectivism struggles to explain the basis for concepts like human rights and moral obligations.
- **Moral Disagreements Become Impossible:** If morality is merely a matter of personal taste, then genuine moral debate is meaningless, similar to arguing about whether brussel sprouts taste good. "they would have to say that moral debate is absurd, meaningless, and a waste of time." (p. 11)
- **Inability to Condemn or Praise Absolutely:** Subjectivism reduces moral judgments to expressions of personal liking or disliking, making absolute condemnation of heinous acts (like the Nazi Holocaust or torturing babies) impossible. "if somebody else likes that, then as a subjectivist, I have to say, well, then that's right for them." (p. 11)
- **We Can Never Be Mistaken About Our Moral Judgments:** If moral truth is based solely on current preference, then individuals cannot be wrong about their moral beliefs at any given time, even if those beliefs change. Spiegel uses his own evolving view on abortion as an example contradicting this implication.

#### 4. Conclusion and Transition to Objectivism:

- Spiegel concludes that both cultural relativism and moral subjectivism are flawed and do not adequately account for our common-sense moral intuitions. "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..." (p. 12)
- He emphasizes the need for a moral theory that can explain duty, rights, justice, the reality of moral disagreement, and the possibility of judging the morality of actions within and across cultures. This sets the stage for the subsequent sessions on objectivist moral theories.

#### Key Quotes:

- "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." (p. 1)
- "Generally speaking, relativism is a view that there are no absolute moral values that apply at all times and in all places." (p. 1)

- "The cultural relativist says that a statement like X is good means that if X coheres with or fits with this culture's mores." (p. 2)
- "The moral subjectivist says that that's the solution. Each individual person has their own particular moral values." (p. 9)
- "plurality does not imply relativity. A plurality of views on anything does not imply that there's no one true view." (p. 4)
- "If you are a cultural relativist, you can't critique what the Nazis did." (p. 7)
- "Cultural relativism implies that all moral reformers are corrupt." (p. 8)
- "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." (p. 11)

**Importance/Relevance:** This material provides a foundational understanding of ethical relativism and common philosophical arguments against it. It is relevant for anyone studying ethics, moral philosophy, or Christian ethics, as it establishes the groundwork for exploring alternative, objectivist ethical frameworks. Spiegel's use of clear explanations and relatable examples makes complex philosophical concepts accessible. His referencing of James Rachels highlights the broad philosophical engagement with this topic, even among non-theists.

## 4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 2, Ethical Relativism

### Study Guide: Ethical Relativism

#### Key Concepts:

- **Ethical Relativism:** The view that there are no absolute moral values that apply at all times and in all places.
- **Moral Truth:** The idea that some moral claims are objectively true or false, independent of individual or cultural opinion.
- **Objectivism:** The belief that moral values have objective truth values and are not merely matters of opinion.
- **Cultural Relativism:** A form of ethical relativism that asserts moral values are defined by a culture and its traditions, folkways, and mores.
- **Moral Subjectivism:** A form of ethical relativism that claims moral values are relative to each individual's preferences.
- **Meta-ethics:** The branch of ethics that analyzes the logic and meaning of moral terms, concepts, and statements.
- **Cultural Differences Argument:** The primary argument for cultural relativism, stating that because different cultures have different moral codes, there is no objective truth in morality.
- **Plurality:** The existence of multiple views or opinions on a subject.
- **Relativity:** The idea that something is dependent on a particular frame of reference or point of view.
- **Moral Absolutism/Objectivism:** The belief that certain universal values are universally true for everyone, and certain actions are absolutely right or wrong regardless of context.
- **Moral Progress:** The idea that a culture's moral values and behaviors can improve over time, implying an external standard for evaluation.
- **Moral Reformer:** An individual who challenges existing cultural mores and values in the pursuit of perceived moral improvement.

- **Reduction to the Absurdity (Reductio ad Absurdum):** A logical argument that demonstrates a position is false by showing that it leads to contradictory or nonsensical conclusions.
- **Moral Intuition:** A gut feeling or sense about what is right or wrong.
- **Moral Duty/Obligation:** A requirement to act in a certain way, often based on moral principles or rules.
- **Moral Rights:** Fundamental entitlements that are believed to belong to every person.
- **Moral Disagreement:** A situation where individuals or groups hold conflicting views about what is morally right or wrong.

#### Quiz:

1. What is the central claim of ethical relativism, and what are the two main forms it takes according to the source?
2. Explain the cultural differences argument. What is the primary logical flaw identified in this argument?
3. According to the source, why does the existence of differing views in areas like astronomy not lead to the conclusion that there is no objective truth in those fields? How is this relevant to the debate on ethical relativism?
4. What are some of the problematic consequences of cultural relativism discussed in the text, such as its implications for criticizing other societies and moral progress?
5. Explain why the concept of a moral reformer, like Martin Luther King Jr., poses a challenge to the truth of cultural relativism.
6. What is moral subjectivism, and how does it differ from cultural relativism in terms of where moral values originate?
7. According to moral subjectivism, what does it mean to say "X is good" or "X is bad"? What analogy is used to illustrate this?
8. What are some of the absurd implications of moral subjectivism, particularly concerning moral disagreement and the possibility of being mistaken about moral judgments?

9. How does the source argue that moral subjectivism fails to adequately account for the common-sense belief in moral duty, obligation, and rights?
10. How does the experience of changing one's moral views (like the example of the abortion issue) serve as a critique of moral subjectivism?

**Answer Key:**

1. Ethical relativism claims that there are no absolute moral values applicable at all times and places. The two main forms are cultural relativism, which grounds morality in cultural norms, and moral subjectivism, which bases morality on individual preferences.
2. The cultural differences argument states that because different cultures have different moral codes, it follows that there is no objective truth in morality. The logical flaw is that the plurality of beliefs does not necessarily imply the absence of a single truth; disagreement does not negate the possibility of one correct view.
3. In fields like astronomy, the existence of differing views (e.g., flat earth, geocentric, heliocentric) does not mean there's no objective truth because there can be evidence and reason to support one view over others. Similarly, the variety of ethical beliefs doesn't automatically mean there's no objective moral truth; we can still reason and argue for certain moral principles.
4. Problematic consequences of cultural relativism include the impossibility of criticizing other societies' values (e.g., Nazism), the denial of moral progress because there's no external standard to judge by, and the implication that moral reformers who challenge cultural norms are inherently wrong.
5. Moral reformers like Martin Luther King Jr. challenge prevailing cultural mores based on a belief in higher, more universal moral principles. If cultural relativism were true, his actions would be considered wrong by definition since he opposed the existing cultural values, contradicting our common understanding of him as a moral hero.
6. Moral subjectivism claims that moral values are relative to each individual person's preferences, meaning what is right or wrong is determined by what each individual likes or dislikes. This differs from cultural relativism, which grounds morality in the shared norms and traditions of a culture rather than individual feelings.



7. According to moral subjectivism, "X is good" simply means "I like X," and "X is bad" means "I don't like X." This is compared to judgments of taste about food, where saying "brussels sprouts are bad" just means "I don't like the taste of brussels sprouts."
8. Absurd implications of moral subjectivism include that moral disagreements become impossible since they are merely statements of personal preference, and we cannot truly condemn or praise anything absolutely (e.g., the Holocaust might be "right" for someone who likes it). Additionally, it implies we can never be mistaken about our moral judgments as long as we are aware of our preferences.
9. Moral subjectivism struggles to provide a foundation for moral duty, obligation, and rights because these concepts typically imply something more than just personal preference. Obligations and rights suggest external standards or requirements that apply regardless of individual liking.
10. The experience of changing one's moral views suggests that one might have been wrong in the past or might be wrong currently, implying the existence of a more objective standard against which these views can be evaluated. Moral subjectivism, however, claims that one's moral view is always correct as long as it reflects their current preference, making the concept of moral mistake nonsensical.

**Essay Format Questions:**

1. Critically analyze the cultural differences argument for ethical relativism. What are its strengths and weaknesses, and why does the author ultimately find it unpersuasive?
2. Discuss the key distinctions between cultural relativism and moral subjectivism. What are the unique challenges and shortcomings associated with each of these forms of ethical relativism?
3. Evaluate the claim that the negative consequences of ethical relativism (such as the inability to condemn harmful cultural practices or recognize moral progress) demonstrate its inadequacy as a moral theory.
4. Explore the implications of moral subjectivism for concepts such as moral disagreement, moral obligation, and the possibility of moral error. How do these implications contrast with common-sense moral intuitions?
5. Considering the arguments presented in the source, articulate why the author believes that an objectivist or absolutist moral theory is necessary to make sense of our moral experiences and beliefs.

## Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Ethical Relativism:** The philosophical stance that moral principles or ethical judgments are not absolute, universal, or objectively true but are relative to the individual, culture, or other standards.
- **Moral Truth:** The concept that some moral statements are objectively true or false, independent of subjective opinions or cultural norms.
- **Objectivism (in Ethics):** The view that moral values and principles exist independently of individual opinions or cultural beliefs and can be known.
- **Cultural Relativism:** The belief that moral and ethical rules differ from culture to culture and that no one set of moral rules is universally valid.
- **Moral Subjectivism:** The ethical theory that moral judgments reflect personal preferences, emotions, or attitudes rather than objective facts.
- **Meta-ethics:** The branch of ethical theory that explores the meaning, reference, and truth values of moral judgments.
- **Cultural Differences Argument:** The argument that because different cultures have different moral codes, there is no objective moral truth.
- **Plurality:** The state of being multiple or diverse. In this context, referring to the existence of various moral beliefs.
- **Relativity:** The state of being dependent on or relative to something else. In ethics, the idea that morality is not absolute but depends on a specific context.
- **Moral Absolutism:** The ethical belief that there are absolute standards against which moral questions can be judged, and that certain actions are inherently right or wrong.
- **Moral Progress:** The idea that society can improve morally over time, often implying a movement towards more just and ethical standards.
- **Moral Reformer:** An individual who advocates for significant changes in prevailing moral norms or laws.
- **Reductio ad Absurdum:** A form of argument that attempts to disprove a statement by showing that it leads logically to a contradiction or to a conclusion that is absurd or nonsensical.
- **Moral Intuition:** A strong, gut feeling or sense about what is right or wrong.

- **Moral Duty:** An obligation or requirement to act in a certain morally prescribed way.
- **Moral Rights:** Fundamental rights believed to belong to all individuals, often considered universal and inalienable.
- **Moral Disagreement:** A situation in which two or more individuals or groups hold conflicting views on a moral issue.

## 5. FAQs on Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 2, Ethical Relativism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### Frequently Asked Questions on Ethical Relativism

**1. What is ethical relativism, and what are its main forms?** Ethical relativism is the view that there are no absolute or universal moral values that apply at all times and in all places. Instead, the rightness or wrongness of an action is relative to a specific framework. The two primary forms of ethical relativism are cultural relativism and moral subjectivism. Cultural relativism asserts that moral values are defined by a culture and its traditions, while moral subjectivism claims that morality is a matter of individual preference.

**2. What is the central argument used to support cultural relativism, and what is a primary criticism of this argument?** The principal argument for cultural relativism is the cultural differences argument, which observes that different cultures have different moral codes and concludes from this plurality that there is no objective truth in morality. A key criticism of this argument is that plurality does not imply relativity. Just because different cultures have different beliefs about morality, it does not logically follow that there is no single true or correct moral standard, just as disagreements in astronomy throughout history did not mean there was no objective truth about the cosmos.

**3. What is the "improved" or expanded version of the cultural differences argument, and how does the source respond to it?** The expanded argument acknowledges the lack of a universally accepted "scientific method" for determining moral truth, suggesting that this absence, unlike in the sciences, justifies the conclusion that there is no objective morality. The response argues that even without a reliable method for ascertaining truth, objective truth can still exist, as illustrated by the truth of heliocentrism long before the development of modern telescopes. Furthermore, the source posits that methods for discovering moral truth do exist, such as reason, human experience, and divine revelation (from a Christian perspective).

**4. What are some of the problematic consequences of accepting cultural relativism, as highlighted in the source?** Cultural relativism leads to several problematic conclusions. First, it makes criticizing the values and actions of other societies impossible, such as condemning Nazi Germany's actions. Second, it negates the concept of moral progress, as there is no transcendent standard against which to measure improvement. Third, it implies that moral reformers who challenge the prevailing cultural norms are inherently wrong or corrupt, undermining the significance of figures like Martin Luther King Jr.

**5. What is moral subjectivism, and how does it differ from cultural relativism?** Moral subjectivism is the view that moral values are relative to each individual's preferences and feelings. Unlike cultural relativism, which grounds morality in cultural norms, moral subjectivism places the individual at the center of moral truth. Something is considered good if an individual likes it and bad if they dislike it.

**6. What are some of the significant problems or absurd implications associated with moral subjectivism?** Moral subjectivism faces numerous criticisms. It eliminates any basis for moral duty, obligation, and rights. It renders genuine moral disagreement impossible, reducing ethical debates to mere statements of personal taste. It leads to the absurd conclusion that we cannot absolutely condemn even the most heinous acts if someone approves of them. Finally, it implies that individuals can never be mistaken about their moral judgments, as morality is solely based on their current preferences.

**7. How does the source use the examples of moral reformers like Martin Luther King Jr. to critique ethical relativism?** The source argues that the very concept of a "moral reformer" who challenges existing cultural norms presupposes the existence of a moral standard that transcends those norms. Martin Luther King Jr.'s actions against Jim Crow laws were based on a belief in a higher moral law, not merely personal or cultural preference. If cultural relativism were true, King would be considered wrong for opposing the prevailing mores, which contradicts the widespread recognition of him as a moral hero.

**8. What is the overall conclusion of the source regarding ethical relativism, and what direction does it suggest for further inquiry?** The source concludes that both cultural relativism and moral subjectivism are flawed and unsustainable views due to their logical inconsistencies and absurd implications. Since relativism fails to adequately account for our common-sense moral intuitions, the source suggests the need to explore objectivist or absolutist moral theories that can provide a more satisfactory framework for understanding concepts like duty, rights, justice, and the reality of moral disagreement, as well as our ability to critique immoral actions across cultures.