

# Ethical Relativism - Britannica

**ethical relativism**, the doctrine that there are no absolute [truths](#) in [ethics](#) and that what is morally right or wrong varies from person to person or from society to society.

## Arguments for ethical relativism

[Herodotus](#), the Greek historian of the 5th century bc, advanced this view when he observed that different societies have different customs and that each person thinks his own society's customs are best. But no set of social customs, Herodotus said, is really better or worse than any other. Some contemporary sociologists and anthropologists have argued along similar lines that [morality](#), because it is a social product, develops differently within different [cultures](#). Each society develops standards that are used by people within it to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable behaviour, and every judgment of right and wrong presupposes one or another of these standards. Thus, according to these researchers, if practices such as polygamy or infanticide are considered right within a society, then they are right "for that society"; and if the same practices are considered wrong within a different society, then those practices are wrong for that society. There is no such thing as what is "really" right, apart from these social codes, for there is no culture-neutral standard to which we can appeal to determine which society's view is correct. The different social codes are all that exist.

A second type of argument for [ethical](#) relativism is due to the Scottish philosopher [David Hume](#) (1711–76), who claimed that [moral](#) beliefs are based on "sentiment," or emotion, rather than on reason. This idea was developed by

the 20th-century school of [logical positivism](#) and by later philosophers such as Charles L. Stevenson (1908–79) and R.M. Hare (1919–2002), who held that the primary function of moral language is not to state facts but to express feelings of approval or disapproval toward some action or to influence the attitudes and actions of others. On this view, known as [emotivism](#), right and wrong are relative to individual preferences rather than to social standards.

Ethical relativism is attractive to many philosophers and social scientists because it seems to offer the best explanation of the variability of moral [belief](#). It also offers a plausible way of explaining how [ethics](#) fits into the world as it is described by modern [science](#). Even if the natural world ultimately consists of nothing but value-neutral facts, say the relativists, ethics still has a foundation in human feelings and social arrangements. Finally, ethical relativism seems especially well suited to explain the [virtue](#) of tolerance. If, from an objective point of view, one's own values and the values of one's society have no special standing, then an attitude of "live and let live" toward other people's values seems appropriate.

## **Ethical relativism and postmodernism**

Beginning in the 1960s and '70s, ethical relativism was associated with postmodernism, a complex philosophical movement that questioned the idea of objectivity in many areas, including ethics. Many postmodernists regarded the very idea of objectivity as a [dubious](#) invention of the modern—i.e., post-[Enlightenment](#)—era. From the time of the Enlightenment, most philosophers and scientists believed that there is an objective, [universal](#), and unchanging [truth](#) about everything—including science, ethics, [religion](#), and

politics—and that human reason is powerful enough to discover this truth. The eventual result of rational inquiry, therefore, was to be one science, one ethics, one religion, and one politics that would be valid for all people in all eras. According to postmodernism, however, the Enlightenment-inspired idea of objective truth, which has influenced the thinking of virtually all modern scientists and philosophers, is an [illusion](#) that has now collapsed.

This development, they contend, is due largely to the work of the German philosopher [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) (1844–1900) and his followers. Nietzsche rejected the naive faith that human beliefs simply mirror reality. Instead, each of our beliefs is grounded in a “perspective” that is neither correct nor incorrect. In ethics, accordingly, there are no moral facts but only moral interpretations of phenomena, which give rise to different existing moral codes. We may try to understand these [moralities](#) by investigating their histories and the psychology of the people who embrace them, but there is no question of proving one or another of them to be “true.” Nietzsche argues, for example, that those who accept the Judeo-Christian ethical system, which he calls a “slave morality,” suffer from weak and fearful personalities. A different and stronger sort of person, he says, would reject this [ethic](#) and create his own values.

Postmodernists believe that Western society has passed beyond the modern [intellectual](#) era and is now in a postmodern period characterized partly by the realization that human life and thought is a mosaic [comprising](#) many perspectives. “Truths,” including the truths of science as well as ethics, should be recognized as beliefs associated with particular traditions that serve particular purposes in particular times and places. The desire for absolutes is

seen as a misguided quest for the impossible. During the last half of the 20th century, the most prominent advocates of this view were [Michel Foucault](#) (1926–84) and [Jacques Derrida](#) (1930–2004).

## Criticisms of ethical relativism

[Ethical](#) relativism, then, is a radical doctrine that is contrary to what many thoughtful people commonly assume. As such, it should not be confused with the uncontroversial thought that what is right depends on the circumstances. Everyone, absolutists and relativists alike, agrees that circumstances make a difference. Whether it is morally permissible to enter a house, for example, depends on whether one is the owner, a guest, or a burglar. Nor is ethical relativism merely the idea that different people have different beliefs about [ethics](#), which again no one would deny. It is, rather, a theory about the status of [moral](#) beliefs, according to which none of them is objectively true. A consequence of the theory is that there is no way to justify any moral principle as valid for all people and all societies.

Critics have lodged a number of complaints against this doctrine. They point out that if ethical relativism is correct, it would mean that even the most outrageous practices, such as slavery and the physical abuse of women, are “right” if they are [countenanced](#) by the standards of the relevant society. Relativism therefore deprives us of any means of raising moral objections against horrendous social customs, provided that those customs are approved by the codes of the societies in which they exist.

But should we not be tolerant of other [cultures](#)? Critics reply that it depends on what sort of social differences are at issue. Tolerance may seem like a good

policy where [benign](#) differences between cultures are concerned, but it does not seem so when, for example, a society engages in officially approved genocide, even within its own borders. And in any case, the critics say, it is a mistake to think that relativism implies that we should be tolerant, because tolerance is simply another value about which people or societies may disagree. Only an absolutist could say that tolerance is objectively good.

Moreover, the critics continue, we sometimes want to criticize our own society's values, and ethical relativism deprives us of the means of doing that as well. If ethical relativism is correct, we could not make sense of reforming or improving our own society's [morals](#), for there would be no standard against which our society's existing practices could be judged deficient. Abandoning slavery, for example, would not be moral progress; it would only be replacing one set of standards with another.

Critics also point out that disagreement about [ethics](#) does not mean that there can be no objective [truth](#). After all, people disagree even about scientific matters. Some people believe that disease is caused by evil spirits, while others believe it is caused by microbes, but we do not on that account conclude that disease has no "real" cause. The same might be true of ethics—disagreement might only mean that some people are more [enlightened](#) than others.

But there is actually far less disagreement than the relativists imply.

Anthropologists have observed that, while there is some variation from [culture](#) to culture, there are also some values that all societies have in common. Some values are, in fact, necessary for society to exist. Without rules requiring truthfulness, for example, there could be no communication, and without rules against murder and assault, people could not live together. These are,

not surprisingly, among the values that anthropologists find wherever they look. Such disagreements as do exist take place against a background of agreement on these large matters.

Lastly, to the claim that there is no [legitimate](#) way to judge a society's practices "from the outside," critics may reply that we can always ask whether a particular cultural practice works to the advantage or disadvantage of the people within the culture. If, for example, [female genital mutilation](#) does more harm than good for the members of the societies that practice it, that fact may be an objective reason for judging the practice to be bad. Thus the appeal to what is helpful or harmful appears to be a standard that [transcends](#) local disagreements and variations.