

All is Not Relative

This video introduces the general ethics concept of relativism. Relativism is the belief that a harmful act is 'right' if the perpetrator claims it is 'right,' but what is right and what is wrong is not always relative.

Values identification is one strategy for becoming more aware of the values we bring to the judgments we make. To learn more about different value systems, watch *GVV Pillar 1: Values* from the GVV video series.

To learn more about issues of relativism in relation to cultural appropriation and the portrayal of other social groups, watch *Appropriation & Attribution* and *Representation*.

The case studies covered on this page explore relativism in terms of cultural traditions and practices. "Bullfighting: Art or Not?" looks at a prominent cultural event that has been around for centuries, but in recent decades has faced increasing criticism over animal rights' abuse. "Banning Burkhas: Freedom or Discrimination?" examines the French law banning women from wearing burkas in public and the debate it sparked over discrimination, cultural relativism, and freedom of religion. For a case study about cultural appropriation, read "Christina Fallin: "Appropriate Culturation?""

Discussion Questions

1. The video states that pluralism is preferable to relativism. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever felt uncomfortable making a moral judgment? If so, why do you think you felt this way?
3. Do you think tolerance is a virtue? What are its limitations? Can you think of an instance when being tolerant is not ethically ideal?
4. Do you believe there is a set of universal values important to all people? If so, what are they? If not, why?
5. How might organizations (businesses, colleges, institutions, etc.) promote a culture of pluralism? How do organizations promote relativism? Is that okay?
6. Ethnocentrism is the idea or practice of judging someone from another culture, or other cultures, only by the values of one's own culture. What are some specific examples of ethnocentrism? What is the difference between ethnocentrism and pluralism?
7. Is it possible to make moral judgments without being ethnocentric? If so, how?



Additional Resources

Beillard, Julien. 2014. "Moral Relativism Is Unintelligible." *Philosophy Now*, July/August 2014.

Elliott, Deni. 2007. "Relativism and Moral Development." In *Ethics in the First Person*, 69-84. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing.

Garofalo, Steven. 2013. *Right For You, But Not For Me: A Response to Moral Relativism*. Charlotte, NC: TriedStone Publishing Company.

Macklin, Ruth. 1980. "Problems in the Teaching of Ethics." In *Ethics Teaching in Higher Education*, edited by Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok, 81-101. New York: Plenum Press.

Meskell, Lynn. 2010. "Human Rights and Heritage Ethics." *Anthropological Quarterly* 83 (4): 839-859.

Velleman, David J. 2013. *Foundations for Moral Relativism*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers.

Weston, Anthony. 2010. *A Practical Companion to Ethics*, 1-15. New York: Oxford University Press.

For more information on concepts covered in this and other videos, as well as activities to help think through these concepts, see Deni Elliott's workbook *Ethical Challenges: Building an Ethics Toolkit*, available for free download at the link below. This workbook explores what ethics is and what it means to be ethical, offering readers a variety of exercises to identify their own values and reason through ethical conflicts. Starting on page 4 is a series of activities encouraging readers to stake out their own values and ethical intuitions; the activities on pages 9-11 address relativism with respect to ethical intuition.

Transcript of Narration

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"When in Rome, do as the Romans do. We've all heard that advice. If we're talking about following the age-old Italian practice of eating salad after the main course, doing as the Romans do is fine. But, if some present-day Romans want to resurrect the ancient Roman practice of *damnatio ad bestias*, in which criminals and other deviants were fed to the lions, it would be irrational to follow that cruel practice just because it's what the Romans, at one time, did.

Relativism is the belief that all it takes to make some potentially harmful act 'right' is the individual's or group's claim that it is 'right.' You can tell that someone is being a relativist when you hear, "Who am I to judge?" or "I can't tell another person what's right for her." When people say that it's not okay to judge someone else, or judge a specific culture's practice by outside standards, they are practicing Relativism. And, they're generally not thinking very deeply about what that means.

There is more than one right way to live one's life. That's where the Relativists are on the right track. Tolerance is indeed a virtue. But, we can allow for a wide range of ethically permitted behaviors and still agree that some actions are wrong – that's to say, ethically prohibited. The problem of being a relativist, if the relativists are consistent, is that they can never make moral judgments about another person's or group's actions. And human beings just don't function that way.

It's human nature to protect ourselves and our loved ones from being caused harm. How would you respond if someone stole your sister's smart phone? Broke into your house? Or even held you prisoner just because they wanted to? It's unlikely that you'd uphold that person's right to do what he felt was right for him – so we all make moral judgments, but the problem is that we often do it inconsistently.

A gunman opening fire in a movie theater? That's simply wrong. Terrorists blowing up school buildings on the other side of the world? Awful. Immoral. It's wrong to cause innocent people pain and death, regardless of mental illness or the point that the terrorists are trying to make.

Different cultures can have different customs such as when it's proper to serve the salad course or how to honor religious beliefs. But when we move into the realm of ethics, we have to follow some universal rules like "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Typically, when people make relativistic claims, it's likely that they're actually promoting Pluralism and not Relativism. Whereas Relativism is tolerance to a fault, Pluralism is tolerance at its best. Pluralists believe that everyone should have the freedom to live their lives as they see fit... just as long as they don't cross the boundary of causing unjustified harm to other people.

So whereas a Relativist might say "Who am I to judge that blowing up a school building is necessarily bad," a Pluralist would condemn that act. A Pluralist embraces diversity and respects all cultures, traditions, and religious beliefs, but would stop short of condoning extremist actions done in their name. So, live and let live is a fine philosophy, as long as it's accompanied by clear judgments that causing unjustified harm is simply wrong. For everyone."