

Our topic today is the reality of value. There are different sorts of value — but we will focus on the reality of moral value.

Talk about moral value includes talk about the rightness or wrongness of actions, the goodness or badness of persons, and the goodness or badness of outcomes or situations.

To ask about the reality of moral value is to ask: are there really facts about what actions and right and what wrong? Are there facts about which people are good and which bad? Are there facts about which outcomes are better than which others?

To ask about the reality of moral value is to ask: are there really facts about what actions and right and what wrong? Are there facts about which people are good and which bad? Are there facts about which outcomes are better than which others?

One answer is, simply: No. There are no such facts. A second answer is, simply: Yes, there are such facts, and they are just as real and objective as facts about what is being served in the Dining Hall tonight.

A third, in between answer is: Yes, there are such facts, but they are really just facts about our standards, or our views; they are relative to a person, or a culture.









Let's focus on this third, subjectivist option for a moment, since it is not an option which has come up much in our discussions of the reality of space and time, or statues and lumps of clay.

Moral relativism is, it seems, a very widely held view. Suppose that you are asked some controversial ethical question, like

Are middle-class people morally obliged to give money to the poor?

Is abortion ever morally permissible?

Many people would respond to at least some questions of this sort — even if not the examples above — by saying something like:

"For me this is wrong, but that does not mean that it is wrong for everyone."

"It depends on your perspective."

"Well, I think that this is wrong, but that is just my opinion."



This appears to be fairly unique to the subject matter of value (though it carries over to questions about aesthetics and politics, as well as ethics).

It is interesting that we would not respond this way to questions about, for example, what is being served in North Dining Hall. In response to an important dining hall question like

Do they have beef stroganoff in North Dining Hall tonight?

most would not respond by saying

"For me it is true that they are serving the stroganoff, but that does not mean that it is true for everyone."

"It depends on your perspective."

"Well, I think that they are serving stroganoff, but that is just my opinion."

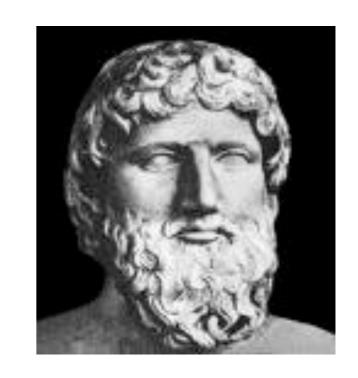


How might one argue for moral relativism?

One clear line of thought is that moral relativism is true because it is just an instance of a more general claim: global relativism. Global relativism is the claim that all claims — not just claims about right and wrong — are only true or false relative to the standards of a person or group.

Unfortunately for this argument, global relativism is a very unattractive position, as has been known since around 360 BC, when Plato wrote the *Theatetus*.

Plato, in effect, suggested that we think about the following statement of the global relativist thesis:



(GR) Every truth is only true relative to the standards of some person or group.



(GR) Every truth is only true relative to the standards of some person or group.

He then posed the following dilemma: either (1) (GR) is true absolutely, or (2) it is true only relative to the beliefs of people who accept (GR).

If (1), then (GR) is false, since it is a counterexample to itself.

If (2), the claim is trivial, and says nothing which conflicts with the claim that some truths are absolute (as uttered by someone who does not accept (GR)).

So the moral relativist would do better not to rest his position on global relativism.





A better argument for moral relativism is the argument from moral disagreement.

We get a version of this argument in the reading today from Ruth Benedict, one of the most important American anthropologists of the 20th century.

Benedict gives us in this paper an impressive list of moral disagreements between various cultures. Notably, we do not find disagreement of this sort about, for example, whether the sky is blue. So, we might ask: Why is there widespread moral disagreement of the sort we find in the world?



## The moral relativist has an answer, which Benedict states nicely:

We do not any longer make the mistake of deriving the morality of our locality and decade directly from the inevitable constitution of human nature. We do not elevate it to the dignity of a first principle. We recognize that morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits. Mankind has always preferred to say, "It is a morally good," rather than "It is habitual," and the fact of this preference is matter enough for a critical science of ethics. But historically the two phrases are synonymous.

On this view, when we say that an action is good, we are just saying that it is the sort of action we do ('it is habitual') or the sort of action of which we approve. Since different cultures do different things and approve of different things, it is no mystery at all that they say different things about what is good.



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We actually get two quite different views expressed in this passage from Benedict:

An action is morally good in a culture just in case people in that culture approve of the action.

An action is morally good in a culture just in case people in that culture habitually perform the action.

These are different, because there can be actions which are habitual in a culture despite not being approved of in that culture. Which of these seems more plausible?



An action is morally good in a culture just in case people in that culture approve of the action.

What, according to the relativist, are people doing when they say that given action is morally good or morally wrong?

A natural thought for the relativist is that when people say that an action is good, what they are saying is that people in the group of which they are a part approve of the action.



Moral disagreement is often presented as the strongest argument in favor of moral relativism. But, as Alasdair MacIntyre emphasizes in the reading for today, the nature of moral disagreement can also be used to argue against moral relativism.



MacIntyre's point is that when people say that actions are right and wrong, they don't take themselves to be saying what the relativist says they are saying. This fact. MacIntyre says,

reveals the incompatibility of any coherent relativism with the beliefs and practices of all the major moral cultures and in so doing it suggests that relativism, although it does not entail moral scepticism, does entail a rejection of the standpoints of all those cultures. For the only judgment taken by moral relativism to be unqualifiedly true is the judgment that no judgment advanced from the standpoints of those cultures is unqualifiedly true.



More disturbing, MacIntyre thinks, is the fact that moral relativism precludes the possibility of one culture learning from the moral views of another.

Suppose that we learn that another culture calls a certain action 'good.' If relativism is true, when we learn this we just learn that that culture approves of that action. But why should this fact have any consequences at all for what actions we approve of?

Here's an analogy: imagine coming across a linguistic community who used the same words we do, but assigned them different meanings. This could hardly be the occasion of our own critical re-evaluation of our own language; we would not change the meanings we give to our words on the basis of some other community speaking a different language than us. Why should coming across a community which approves of different things be any different?

There is, if MacIntyre is right, an irony here. Moral relativism is defended against moral realism on the grounds that the latter (allegedly) involves lack of respect for alternative views of morality. But moral relativism seems to make constructive engagement with alternative views of morality impossible.



The reason why moral relativism leads to this conclusion is that, in a certain sense, it makes moral disagreement between cultures impossible.

Consider the following exchange:

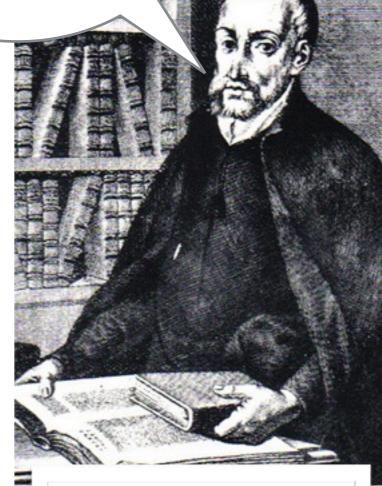
Me: I am hungry. You: I am not hungry.

Have we disagreed? Obviously not; I was talking about me, and you were talking about you; and there's no inconsistency in one person being hungry while the other is not.

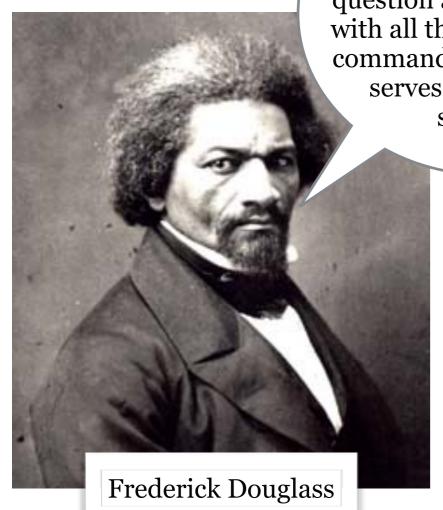
Let's consider what would seem to be a moral disagreement between people from different cultures.

"I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged ... dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery."

"Those whose function is the use of their bodies and nothing better can be expected of them ... are slaves of nature. It is better for them to be ruled thus."



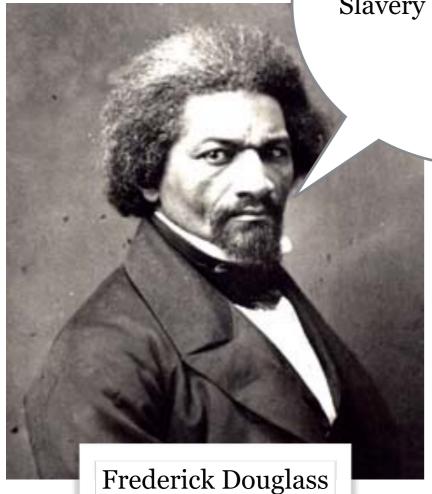
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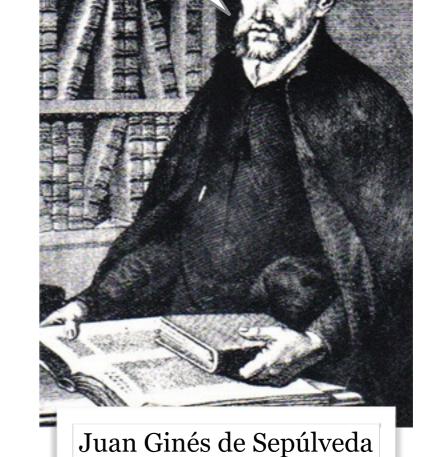


It seems clear that Douglass and Sepulveda would have endorsed the following claims, which appear to state a disagreement.

Slavery is permissible.

Slavery is always wrong.





But now think about what these claims mean, if moral relativism is true.

"Slavery is disapproved of in mid-19th century America." "Slavery is approved of in 16th century Spain."



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One might use this case to give the following argument against moral relativism:

- 1. People from different cultures (like Douglass and Sepulveda) sometimes disagree about morality.
- 2. If moral relativism is true, people from different cultures never disagree about morality.

C. Moral relativism is false. (1,2)

The argument is valid. (It is of the form: P; If Q, then not-P; therefore not-Q.) Which premise should the relativist reject?

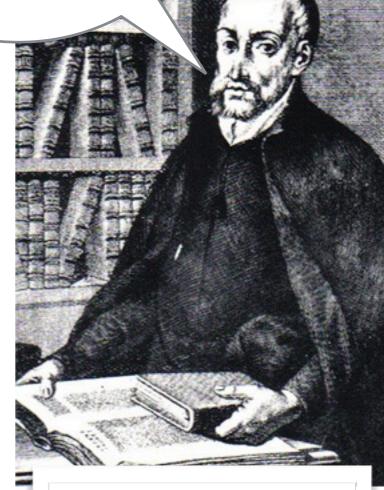
It seems hard for the relativist to reject premise (2); perhaps the way to go is to reject premise (1). Is this plausible?

Frederick Douglass

Here is a second, related problem. It is very hard to deny that there is some sense in which Douglass had the right side in the debate about slavery; that he was right, and that Sepulveda was wrong.

"I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged ... dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery."

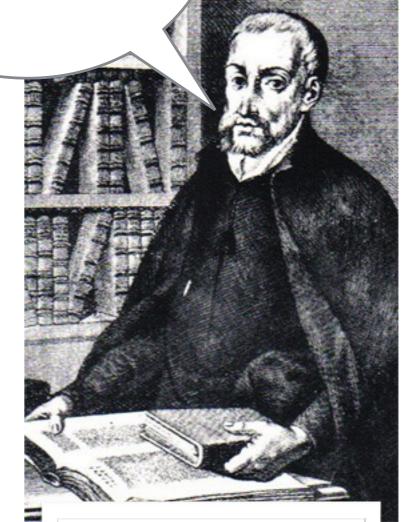
"Those whose function is the use of their bodies and nothing better can be expected of them ... are slaves of nature. It is better for them to be ruled thus."



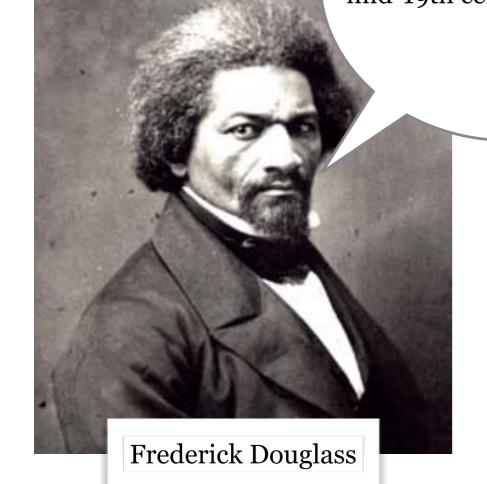
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But when we look at the relativist's interpretations of the relevant claims, we find that there is no sense in which Douglass was right, and Sepulveda wrong.

"Slavery is disapproved of in mid-19th century America." "Slavery is approved of in 16th century Spain."



Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda





## Related points can be made about some of the examples discussed by Benedict:

"This head-hunting that takes place on the Northwest Coast after a death is no matter of blood revenge or of organized vengeance. There is no effort to tie tip the subsequent killing with any responsibility on the part of the victim for the death of the person who is being mourned. A chief whose son has died goes visiting wherever his fancy dictates, and he says to his host, "My prince has died today, and you go with him." Then he kills him.

In this, according to their interpretation, he acts nobly ..."

There is, I think, a strong inclination to say: what they do is wrong. One shouldn't respond to a death with indiscriminate killing.

But what am I saying when I say that what they do is wrong? Am I just saying that my culture disapproves of their actions? Even the members of the Northwest Coast tribe might agree with this!



One might use this to construct the following argument against moral relativism:

- 1. There is some sense in which anti-slavery cultures were right about the moral status of slavery, and pro-slavery cultures were wrong.
- 2. If moral relativism is true, there is no sense in which anti-slavery cultures were right and proslavery cultures were wrong.

C. Moral relativism is false. (1,2)

Premise (1) seems difficult to reject; and it is hard to see how premise (2) could be false.

So far we have focused on apparent moral disagreements between people of different cultures. How about disagreements between people of the same culture?



Frederick Douglass

Here, according to the moral relativist, we do have a genuine disagreement — which is what we want.

But it is a disagreement with a surprising resolution: on these interpretations, it appears that when Calhoun said that slavery was good, he spoke truly.

'Where two races of

"Slavery is disapproved of in mid-19th century America."

different origin ... are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding States between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good - a positive good." John C. Calhoun



We can, unsurprisingly, turn this into an argument against moral relativism of the sort we have already considered:

- 1. If moral relativism is true, then those who spoke in favor of slavery in mid-19th century America spoke truly, and those who spoke against it spoke falsely.
- 2. It is not the case that those who spoke in favor of slavery in mid-19th century America spoke truly, and those who spoke against it spoke falsely.

C. Moral relativism is false. (1,2)

But there is also a kind of general lesson here. Some of the figures we most admire in history were, like Douglass, advocates for moral views which went against the views of the societies of which they were a part. But according to the moral relativist who say that moral claims are claims about what one's society approves of, such 'moral pioneers' will always be getting things wrong. There is thus a sense in which moral relativism is a profoundly conservative position: it always validates the moral view of the majority in a society.

So, even if seems at first that one can argue for moral relativism on the basis of moral disagreement, in the end the moral relativist has trouble making sense of that disagreement.

How can we do better?





The moral realist says: moral disagreement is just disagreement about an objective fact, no different in principle than disagreement about what is in North Dining Hall tonight.

One sort of moral nihilist says: it is real disagreement — but it isn't a factual disagreement at all.



Not all uses of language are attempts to describe facts. Here are some examples:

"I declare you husband and wife."

"Boooo!" (said while at sporting event)

One might have the view that moral language is like this: it is not even an attempt to describe facts about the world. This view is called emotivism. Emotivism is an attractive position for the moral nihilist, who can then explain why our uses of moral language seem to make sense despite the fact that there are no facts about what is right and wrong.

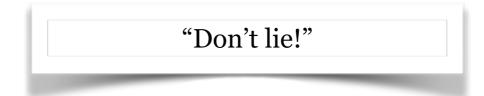


## Let's consider the following simple use of moral language:

"Lying is wrong."

What should the emotivist say about the meaning of this sentence? Here are two natural interpretations.

On the first, it is a kind of imperative, like:



On the second, it is a kind of expression of an attitude of being against lying:

"Boo: lying"



On either interpretation, the emotivist might reasonably claim to have an advantage over the relativist in explaining what's going on in cases of moral disagreement. According to the emotivist, it is like one of the following kinds of disagreement:

"Study hard tonight!"
"Don't study hard tonight, watch TV instead!"

"Boo, Notre Dame!"
"Yay, Notre Dame!"

Both are genuinely varieties of disagreement — but neither is disagreement about the facts.



One apparent strength of this sort of view is that it explains an interesting fact about moral claims: that moral disagreements seem particularly resistant to resolution. Sometimes, of course, moral disagreements can be resolved; but other times, it seems possible for two people to, for example, know all of the relevant facts about abortion, and still disagree about whether it is sometimes morally permissible. By contrast, it does not seem possible for two people to know all of the relevant facts about the dining hall, and yet disagree about whether stroganoff is on offer.

On the present view, this sort of persistent disagreement would be explained by the fact that the two people are really not disagreeing about any facts about the world: they are, instead, simply expressing contrary preferences.



However, even if emotivism seems plausible for sentences like "Stealing is wrong", it does not fit other uses of ethical language as well. Consider, for example past tense sentences like

"The Athenians were wrong to put Socrates to death."

could this really mean:

"Athenians, don't put Socrates to death!"

or

"Boo, ancient Athenians!"

This seems absurd.



Other problems arise with uses of ethical language in more complex sentences. For example, the following sentence seems to make sense:

If stealing is wrong, then Bob would never steal.

But consider how the emotivist might analyze this sentence:

If don't steal!, then Bob would never steal.

If Boo:stealing, then Bob would never steal.

This doesn't just seem like the wrong analysis; it is not even grammatical. The problem seems to be that we cannot grammatically use imperatives or interjections in the "if" part of an "if-then" sentence, even though we can use ethical sentences in that way. It seems to follow that ethical sentences can't just be disguised imperatives or interjections.



These have been criticisms of emotivism. But the moral nihilist might not be an emotivist. She might say that moral language is a bit like the following sentence, uttered by my daughter:

"Santa Claus will bring me an Elmo doll this year."

It seems clear that she is trying to describe the world: she is saying something about how she takes the world to be. It's just that what she is saying is false, since there is no Santa Claus.

The moral nihilist might say the same thing about "Stealing is wrong": he might say that it is an attempt to describe the world, but one which is always false, since there are no such things as right and wrong actions.



This strikes many people as a hard view to swallow. For one thing, if moral sentences are simply all false in the way that all simple sentences about Santa are false, it seems that, once we realize this, we should simply stop using moral language. We should stop ever saying that anyone should do anything. But could this be right?

Note that this would not be a consequence of the version of moral nihilism which analyzes moral sentences as disguised imperatives or interjections; this analysis would not give us a reason to stop using moral language. Hence it seems that the moral nihilist has a choice between two different analyses of moral sentences, each of which comes with a serious cost.



Let's return to moral realism, the view that there are objective facts about what is right and wrong which are not relative to a culture or group.

One reason why people are reluctant to accept moral realism is that it seems to imply a lack of respect for distinct moral perspectives. If we say that our moral views are the objectively correct ones, doesn't that involve unfairly privileging ourselves above other groups and cultures, which might have an equal claim on the truth?



There are two main things to say about this line of argument.

First: to be a moral realist is to believe that there are objective moral facts; it is not to believe that one knows what they are. You might be a moral realist and be completely agnostic about whether your moral code, or that of some other culture, is the correct one.

Compare: you might believe that there is an objective truth about what is being served in the dining hall tonight, and yet be completely unsure about whether you or your roommate is more likely to guess correctly what it will be.



Second, the argument is in a way self-refuting. The simplest way to express it would be as follows:

1. One ought to respect moral systems other than one's own.

C. Moral realism is false.

Suppose that the first premise is true. What does 'ought' mean here?

One option is that it means 'objectively ought.' But if there are things we objectively ought to do, then the conclusion is false and the argument invalid.

Another option is that it means 'ought according to the standards of my moral system.' But then the argument is clearly invalid — from the fact that one group approves of respect, it does not follow that there are no objective moral truths.



The view that one ought to tolerate diverse perspectives is really an argument for a kind of moral realism: a moral realism which places high value on tolerance.

It is also worth emphasizing in this connection that the moral realist can and should say that many choices are, from a moral point of view, equally good. The moral realist does not make the absurd claim that for every choice between A and B, one of A and B is morally better than the other. The moral realist instead makes the much more modest claim that for some choices between A and B (e.g., whether to own slaves), one of A and B is objectively morally better than the other.

Given this, moral realism is not on conflict with the view that various diverse ways of living one's life are equally good. Indeed, insofar as that is the claim about objective goodness, it is an expression of moral realism.



If the argument from tolerance against moral realism is, even if popular, unpersuasive, are there any good reasons not to be a moral realist?

One challenge to the view comes from the facts about disagreement already mentioned. If there is an objective realm of moral facts, why do we find the kind of persistent disagreement about morality that we in fact find?

The moral realist might reasonably reply that much of what seems to be moral disagreement is really non-moral disagreement. But it is hard to deny that there are some quite persistent and genuinely moral disagreements. Is this a problem for the moral realist?



A second challenge comes from the fact that there seems to be a necessary connection between sincerely saying that something is good, and having a motivation to pursue that thing. It seems to be impossible to sincerely hold that something is good while having no motivation at all to bring it about.

But this can seem puzzling from the point of view of the moral realist. If when we say that something is good we are just describing some fact, why should it be impossible to do this sincerely while lacking any motivation to pursue the thing? One can, e.g., sincerely say that something has a certain shape or color without having any motivation to pursue it.

This phenomenon would, on the face of it, appear to fit better with the emotivists analysis of moral language than with the view that we use moral language to describe a realm of objective facts.