

is morality real, and is it relative?

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 are 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 are 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.



Moral nihilism



Moral realism



Moral  
relativism



## Moral relativism

Let's focus on this third, relativist option first.

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.”



## Moral relativism

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.”

## Moral relativism

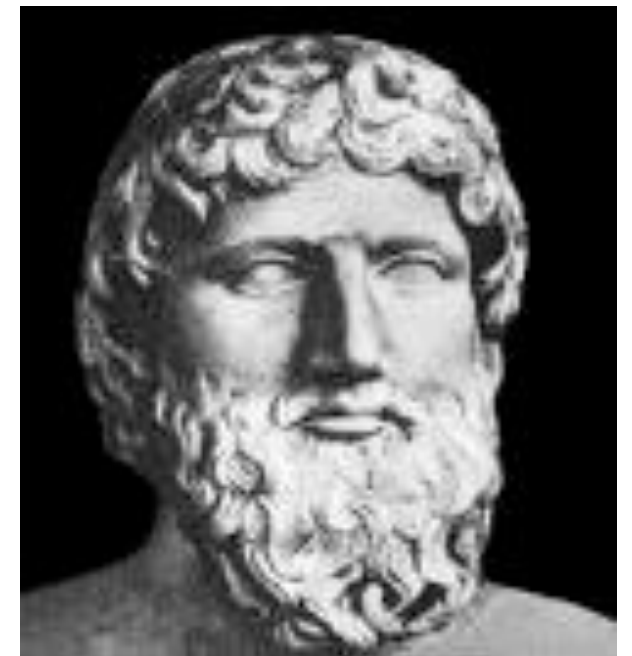
How might one argue for moral relativism?

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.





## Moral relativism

(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. Of course it is true that people who accept (GR) hold that (GR) is true; but that is also true of the claim that the Easter Bunny is real. The fact that people who accept (GR) hold that (GR) is true does not rule out the existence of absolute truths — any more than the corresponding fact about Easter Bunny believers rules out the claim that the Easter Bunny does not exist.

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

## Moral 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?





## Moral relativism

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.



## Moral relativism

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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?



## Moral relativism

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.

As we have seen, one may argue for moral relativism on the basis of moral disagreements between cultures. But, interestingly, one might also argue against moral relativism on the grounds that it cannot give an adequate treatment of the nature of moral disagreement. Indeed, given certain assumptions, it makes moral disagreement between cultures impossible.



## Moral relativism

As we have seen, one may argue for moral relativism on the basis of moral disagreements between cultures. But, interestingly, one might also argue against moral relativism on the grounds that it cannot give an adequate treatment of the nature of moral disagreement. Indeed, given certain assumptions, it makes moral disagreement between cultures **impossible**.

Consider the following exchange:

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

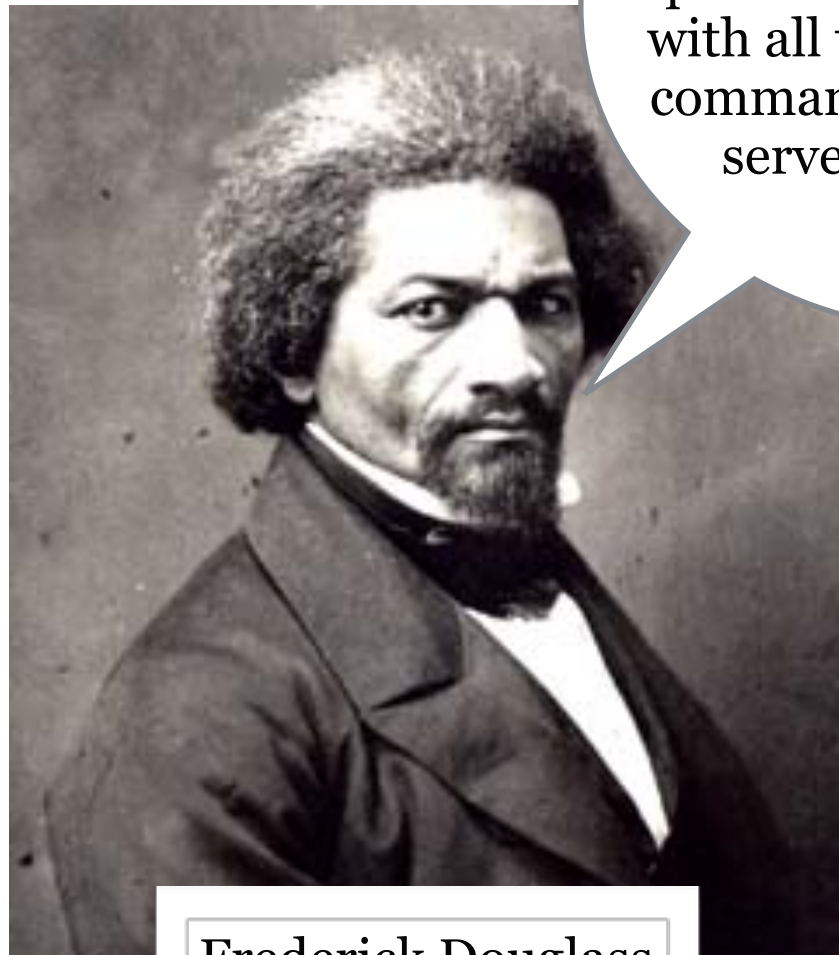
Have we disagreed? Obviously not; I was talking about me, and you were talking about you; and there's no inconsistency in one person being hungry while the other is not.

Moral  
relativism

But now consider what would seem to be a moral disagreement  
between people from different cultures.

Do they  
disagree?

“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.”



Frederick Douglass

“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.”



Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda

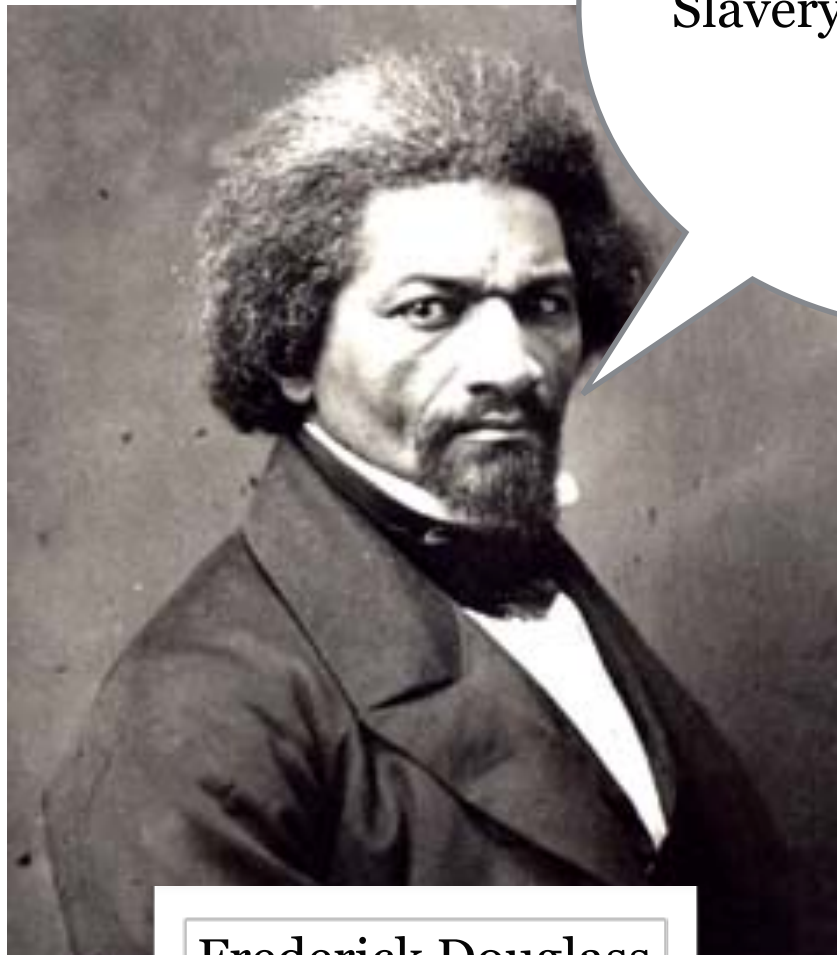


It seems clear that Douglass and Sepulveda would have endorsed the following claims, which appear to state a disagreement.

Moral  
relativism

Slavery is always wrong.

Slavery is permissible.



Frederick Douglass

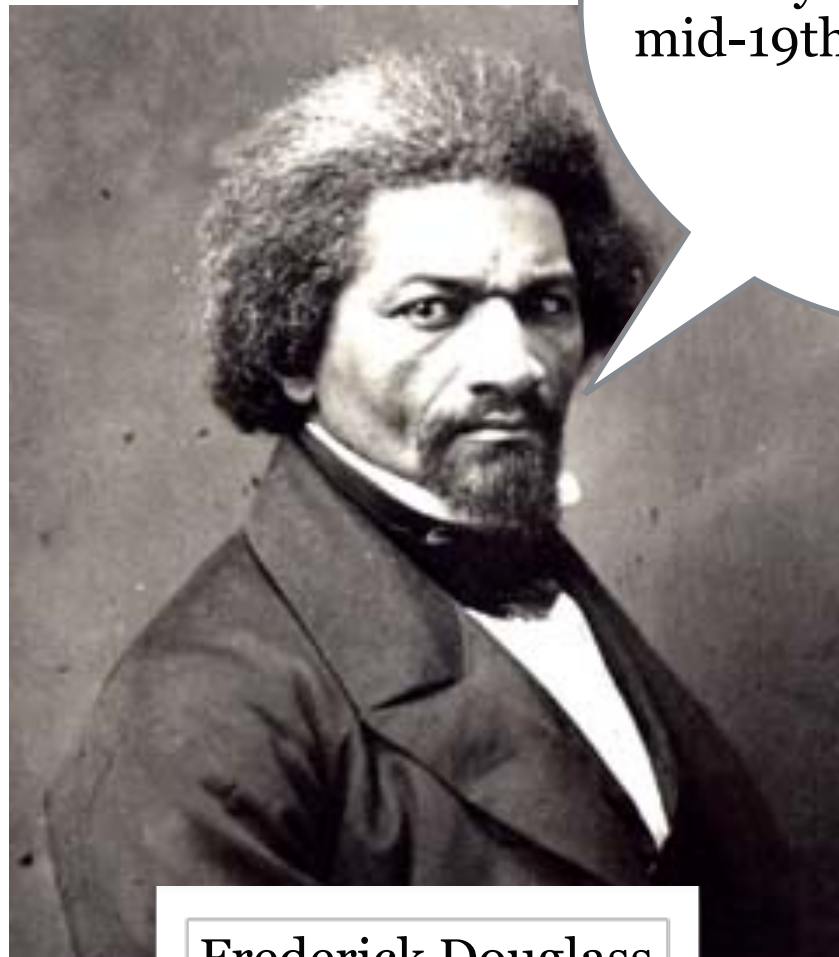


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Moral  
relativism

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

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



Frederick Douglass

“Slavery is approved of in 16th century Spain.”



Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda





## Moral relativism

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.

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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?

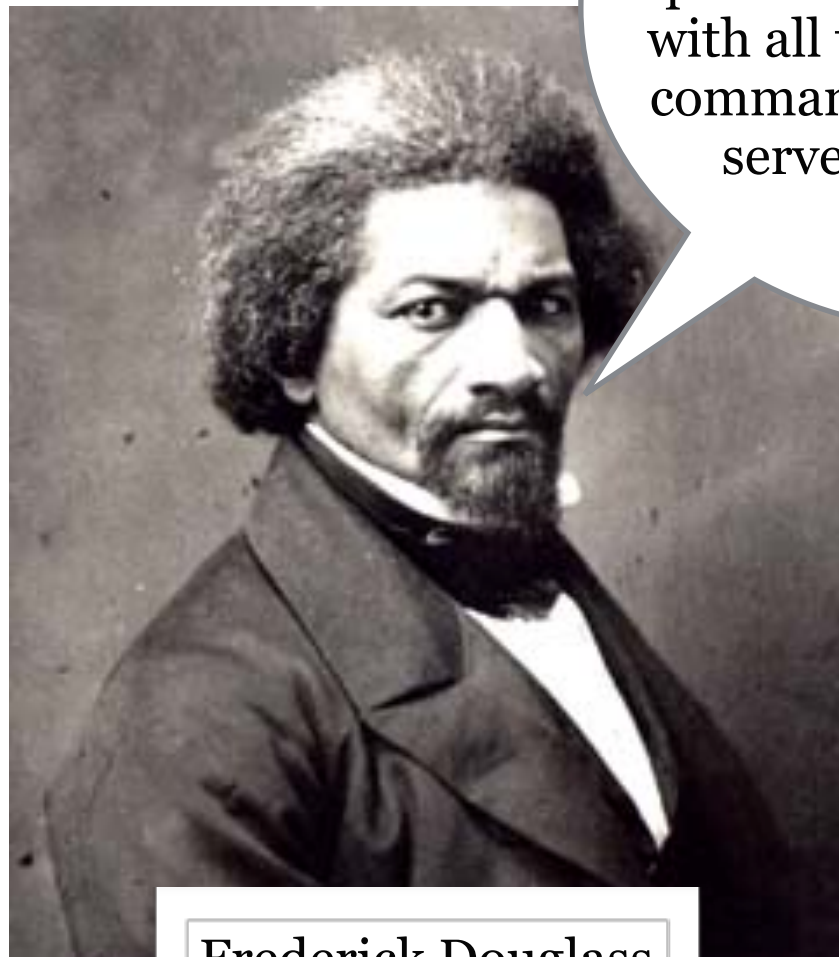
It seems hard for the relativist to reject premise (2); perhaps the way to go is to reject premise (1). Is this plausible?



Moral  
relativism

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 Sepúlveda 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.”



Frederick Douglass

“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.”

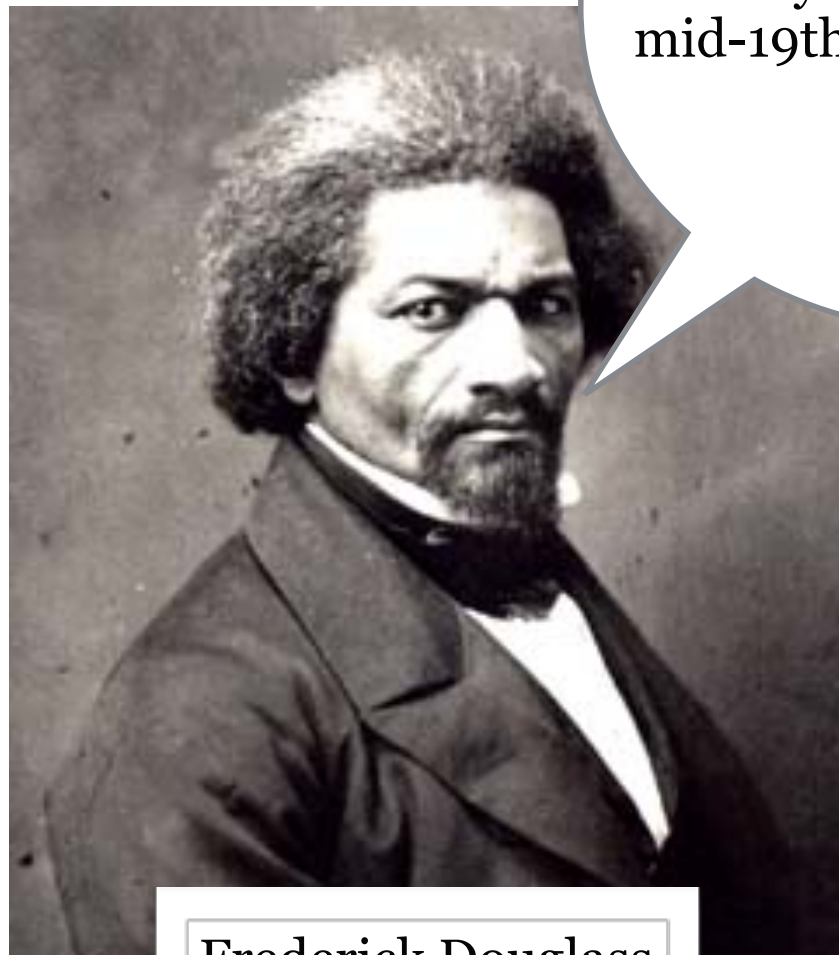


Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda

Moral  
relativism

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."



Frederick Douglass

"Slavery is approved of in 16th century Spain."



Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda





## Moral relativism

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!



## Moral relativism

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 pro-slavery cultures were wrong.
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- 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.

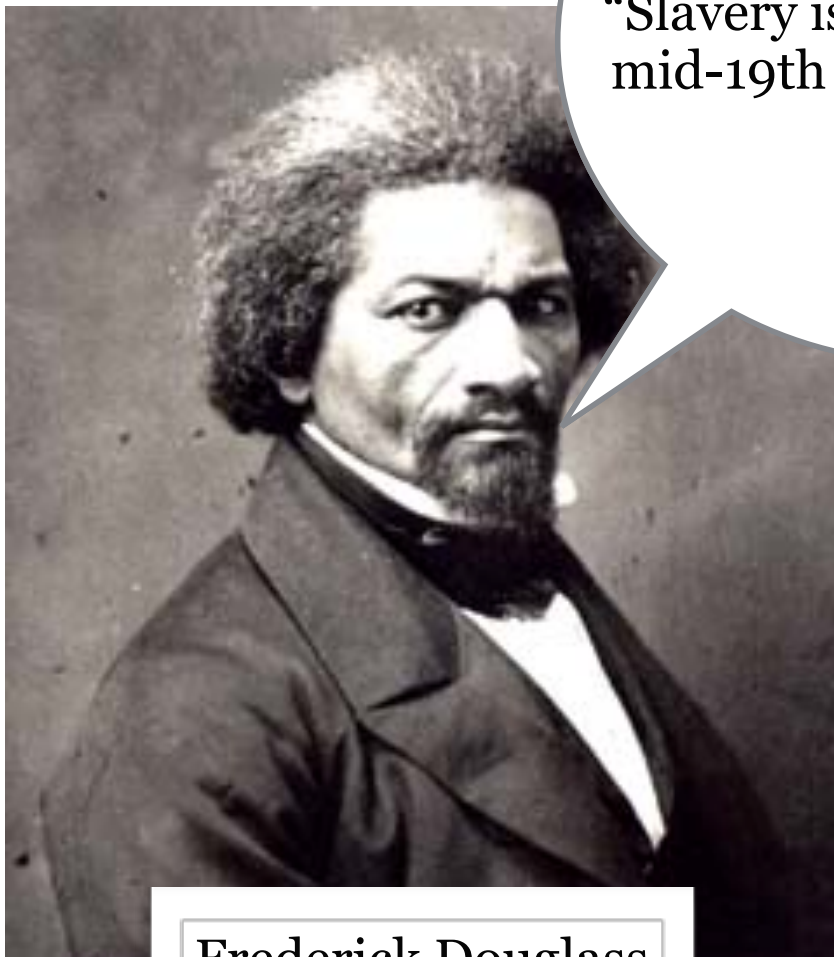
So far we have focused on apparent moral disagreements between people of different cultures. How about disagreements between people of the same culture?

Moral  
relativism

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

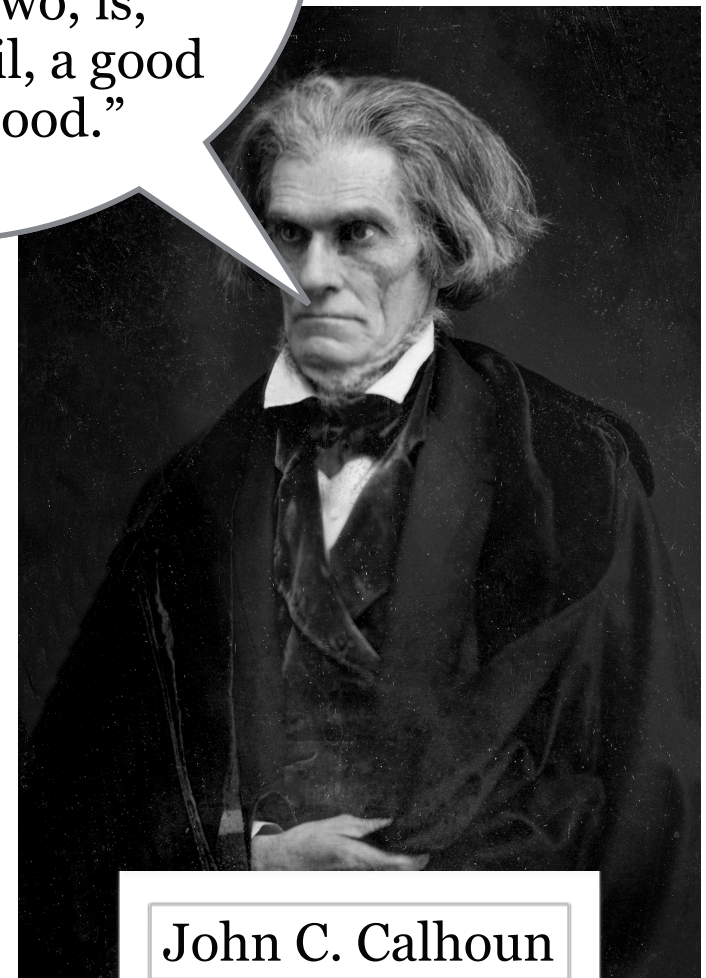
But it is a disagreement with a surprising resolution: on these interpretations, it appears that when Calhoun said that slavery was good, he spoke truly.

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



Frederick Douglass

“Where two races of 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



## Moral relativism

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 it 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.

Let's turn to moral nihilism to see whether it can do any better.



The moral nihilist simply denies that there are any moral facts — so she rejects both moral realism (which says that there are such facts, and that they are objective) and moral relativism (which says that there are such facts, and that they are relative).

But if there are no moral facts, what are we doing when we go around saying that certain things are good or bad?



But if there are no moral facts, what are we doing when we go around saying that certain things are good or bad?

The simplest view that the moral nihilism might take is that we are simply making a mistake: we are making claims about something which does not in fact exist.

We are familiar with other cases of this sort. Consider, for example, my daughter's utterance of

"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.



A red circle with a thin grey border, containing the text "Moral nihilism" in white.

## Moral nihilism

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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 sort of nihilist is sometimes called an **error theorist**, since on this view our utterances about good and bad and right and wrong are just a kind of mistake.

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?



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One way to make this worry sharper is to note that the error theorist will have trouble saying that one of the following sentences is in any sense better than the other:

“Enslaving people is morally wrong.”

“Enslaving people is morally good.”

According to the error theorist, nothing is wrong or good — so these sentences are, equally, mistakes.



## Moral nihilism

Because of problems like this, many moral nihilists are not error theorists. An alternative form of moral nihilism says that moral sentences are not trying and failing to describe moral facts — rather, they aren't attempts to describe facts at all.

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

“Get out of my classroom!”

“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.

## Moral nihilism



This is the view defended by A.J. Ayer in the reading for today.

If now I generalize my previous statement and say, 'Stealing money is wrong.' I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning – that is, expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written 'Stealing money!!' – where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed. It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false.

Consider the following simple use of moral language:

“Lying is wrong.”

Ayer's view seems to be that it has the same meaning as something like the following:

“Boo: lying”



Moral nihilism

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“Lying is wrong.”

Ayer’s view seems to be that it has the same meaning as something like the following:

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Another emotivist view is that this sentence is a kind of disguised **imperative**:

“Don’t lie!”



## Moral nihilism

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 seem like genuine varieties of disagreement —  
but neither is disagreement about the facts.





## Moral nihilism

Both seem like genuine varieties of disagreement — but neither is disagreement about the facts.

As Ayer recognizes, this can seem problematic for the emotivist, since we do seem to have genuine arguments about moral questions.

This may seem, at first sight, to be a very paradoxical assertion. For we certainly do engage in disputes which are ordinarily regarded as disputes about questions of value. But, in all such cases, we find, if we consider the matter closely, that the dispute is not really about a question of value, but about a question of fact. When someone disagrees with us about the moral value of a certain action or type of action, we do admittedly resort to argument in order to win him over to our way of thinking. But we do not attempt to show by our arguments that he has the 'wrong' ethical feeling towards a situation whose nature he has correctly apprehended. What we attempt to show is that he is mistaken about the facts of the case.



## Moral nihilism

In many cases of seeming moral disagreement, Ayer thinks, the disagreement is really not about rightness and wrongness at all, but about some non-moral facts.

Can you think of any examples?

But, one might think, a problem for the emotivist remains. Maybe, as Ayer says, some apparently moral disagreements are really disagreements about the facts. But not all are like this. What should the emotivist say about cases in which people disagree about all of the underlying non-moral facts, but still disagree about morality? Is this really not a disagreement about what is true?





## Moral nihilism

Here is what Ayer says:

if our opponent happens to have undergone a different process of moral 'conditioning' from ourselves, so that, even when he acknowledges all the facts, he still disagrees with us about the moral value of the actions under discussion, then we abandon the attempt to convince him by argument. We say that it is impossible to argue with him because he has a distorted or undeveloped moral sense; which signifies merely that he employs a different set of values from our own. We feel that our own system of values is superior, and therefore speak in such derogatory terms of his. But we cannot bring forward any arguments to show that our system is superior. For our judgement that it is so is itself a judgement of value, and accordingly outside the scope of argument. It is because argument fails us when we come to deal with pure questions of value, as distinct from questions of fact, that we finally resort to mere abuse.

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## Moral nihilism

Ayer thinks that emotivism has the advantage that it explains an interesting fact about moral claims: that moral disagreements can sometimes seem particularly resistant to resolution.

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.



## Moral nihilism

Here is a second argument for emotivism. 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 emotivist's analysis of moral language. If when we use moral language we are expressing a preference or feeling, you might think that one can begin to see why there is a built-in connection between judgements about value and motivation.



## Moral nihilism

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.



## Moral nihilism

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.



## Moral nihilism

The emotivist might reply by saying that moral terms mean different things when they occur in the “if” parts of “if-then” sentences.

But this view faces an immediate problem. Consider the following argument:

1. If killing is wrong, then convincing someone to kill is wrong.
  2. Killing is wrong.
  - 
  - C. Convincing someone to kill is wrong. (1,2)

This argument seems to be valid. But how could it be valid, if “wrong” meant something different in the “if” part of premise (1) than it does in premise (2)?



## Moral nihilism

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Compare the following argument:

1. I keep my money in the bank.
2. I sometimes go fishing on the bank.
- 
- C. I sometimes go fishing where I keep my money. (1,2)

On the natural interpretation that “bank” has different meanings in (1) and (2), this is invalid. The emotivist who thinks that “wrong” means different things in different sentences must explain why this is not also true of the argument about killing.





## Moral nihilism

Summing up: the moral nihilist has a choice between two different analyses of moral language — emotivism and error theory — each of which comes with its own costs.





## Moral realism

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.



Moral realism

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.

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C. Moral realism is false.

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



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

---

C. Moral realism is false.

One option is that it means 'objectively ought.' Then the argument is equivalent to this one:

1. It is an objective moral fact that one ought to respect moral systems other than one's own.

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C. Moral realism is false (and so there are no objective moral facts).

Is this a good argument?



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

---

C. Moral realism is false.

Another option is that it means 'ought according to the standards of my moral system.' Then the argument is equivalent to this one:

1. People in my society approve of respecting moral systems other than one's own.

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C. Moral realism is false.

Is this a good argument?





## Moral realism

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 say that many choices are, from a moral point of view, equally good. The moral realist need not make the 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 in 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.



## 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?



## Moral realism

A second challenge comes from the fact, which we already discussed in connection with emotivism, that there seems to be a necessary connection between sincerely saying that something is good, and having a motivation to pursue that thing. If when we say that something is good we are simply asserting that it has a certain property, why should that have to be connected to motivation in any way?

What should the moral realist say in reply?