



Ima
Relativist

*Cultural relativism (CR): “good”
means “socially approved.”*



Three arguments for rejecting objective values and moving to cultural relativism:

- Cultural differences
- Product of culture
- No neutral standpoint

*A big problem is that
CR forces us to conform
to society's norms.*



CR makes this
reasoning valid



X is socially approved.
∴ X is good.

CR makes this
self-contradictory



*“X is socially approved
but it isn't good.”*

Apply cultural relativism to



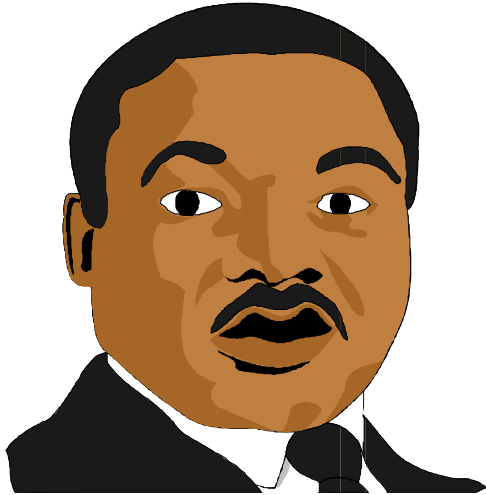
racism



global
warming



moral
education



Martin Luther King

“Racist actions
are objectively
wrong.”

Moral realism (the *objective view*) says that
some things are objectively right or wrong,
regardless of what anyone may think or feel.

CR's *cultural
differences*
argument

No idea on which there is wide disagreement is objectively true.

All moral beliefs are ideas on which there is wide disagreement.

∴ No moral beliefs are objectively true.

Problems with the two premises

1. Disagreements don't prove that there's no truth of the matter.
2. Premise 2 is one-sided: there's much consensus across the globe on many moral norms.

CR distorts ethical differences



- CR sees the world as divided into *morally uniform societies*.
- CR ignores the *subgroup problem*.
- Moral realists needn't absolutize their society's norms ("We're right and they're wrong").
- Moral realists can criticize their own society's norms by studying how the norms of other societies work.
- Moral realists can respect *most* cultural differences.
- CR does little to establish common norms *between* societies.

CR's *product*
of culture
argument

No products of culture express objective truths.

All moral beliefs are products of culture.

∴ No moral beliefs express objective truths.

Problems with the two premises

1. Many products of culture (e.g. books) express objective truths.
2. Other factors besides culture are important to morality, like individual differences, logic, biology, religion, and developmental psychology.

CR's *no
neutral
standpoint
argument*

No belief that can't be strongly defended on culturally neutral grounds is objectively true.
All moral beliefs are beliefs that can't be strongly defended on culturally neutral grounds.
∴ No moral beliefs are objectively true.

Problems with the two premises

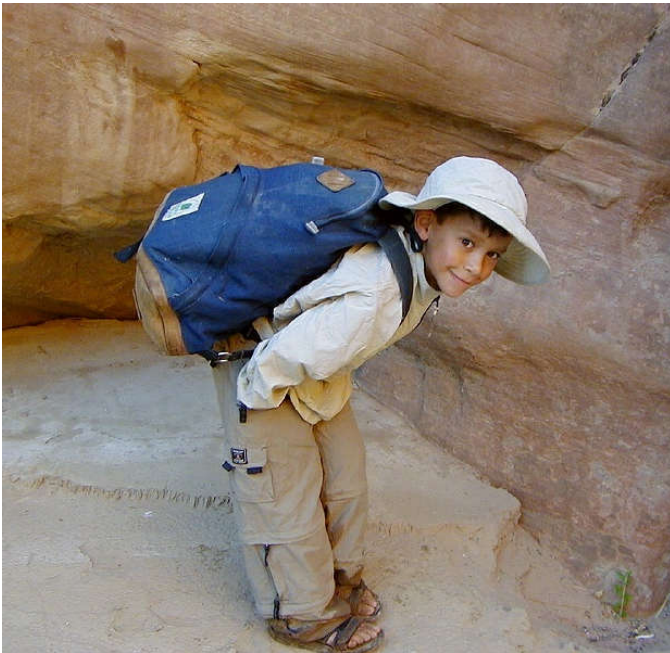
1. There may be truths that can't be defended this way; also, premise 1 is self-refuting.
2. Premise 2 is premature, since there may be culturally neutral ways to defend many moral truths.

CR isn't so tolerant. On CR, minority moral views are always wrong; and ridiculing those of other cultures is good if it's socially approved.



CR challenges ethics: *How can we reason together about ethics in a multicultural world with conflicting value systems?*

Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development



1. Punishment/obedience
2. Rewards
3. Parental approval
4. Social approval
5. Utilitarian
6. Impartial principles
that are just for all

Is morality gendered?

- Carol Gilligan thinks Kohlberg's stages describe male ethical thinking, which emphasizes *justice*, while females think differently and emphasize *personal relationships*.
- Others think gender differences here are minor (and explained by how females are socialized); males and females go through the same stages (like parental approval stage 3), value both justice and personal relationships, and are on both sides of all big ethical issues.
- Many think there's one correct ethics for all, but it needs to attend to the experience of both males and females.

Some types of relativism

- *Normative relativism*: “good” and similar terms apply only relative to something else – like society (CR) or the individual (subjectivism).
- *Global relativism*: all statements, not just ones about morality, are true only in a relative way (perhaps “true for me” but not “true for you”).
- *Descriptive ethical relativism*: people in fact differ in their basic moral norms (either mildly or radically).
- *Metaethical relativism*: ideally rational moral thinkers would disagree (either mildly or radically).