

# Moral relativism: outline

- What moral relativism is not: moral realism.
- Moral realism may include
- Some alternatives to moral realism
- Moral relativism or cultural relativism
- Moral disagreement: killing babies
- Realist judgement
- Relativist judgement
- Can disagreements be resolved?
- Universal rule against lying

# Moral realism/objectivism

- **Ontological position:**

There are moral facts independent of us.

- **Epistemological position:**

We can have knowledge about moral facts.

- **Example: Rachels, page 10:**

“Thus, if we want to discover the truth, we must let our feelings be guided as much as possible by reason. This is the essence of morality. The morally right thing to do is always the thing best supported by the arguments.”

# Moral realism may include

- **General realism:** there are objective truths that we can know, we have access the world “an sich”.
- **Assumptions about the moral subject:** e.g. rationality, individuality, autonomy.
- **Assumptions about language and culture:** e.g. translations and descriptions from outside possible.
- **Dichotomic distinctions, such as:**
  - Rationality – emotionality
  - Fact – value
  - Objectivity - subjectivity

# Alternatives to moral realism

- **Moral skepticism**

Doubts or denies e.g. moral knowledge, moral truth

- **Moral Anti-realism**

Denies that e.g. moral truth is independent of us

- **Moral relativism or 'cultural relativism'**

- Morality varies greatly with culture and time
- Moral truth and knowledge is not absolute, but dependent on culture and society.
- Morality is necessarily socially, culturally and historically situated, moral objectivity is impossible.

# Moral or cultural relativism

- **Descriptive moral relativism**

Observation: normative moral content varies with culture, group, and time.

Anthropological position (e.g. Franz Boas): distinction between (western) values and facts.

- **Metaethical moral relativism**

Morality as such is dependent on culture, there are no objective moral facts.

Judging people according to ones own (assumed universal) standards is a fallacy.

# **Moral disagreement: killing babies**

- **Observation: Moral standards differ.  
Question: What are the correct standards?**
- **Inuit infanticide (Rachels, page 15), right or wrong?**

# A realist may answer

- **Killing babies is right/wrong**, which is a universally true objective moral judgement.
- **Under those circumstances (harsh climate, etc.), it is right/wrong**, which is a universally true objective moral judgement.
- **“Rational reconstruction” is possible:**  
'explaining' the differences in morality has moral implications, since rationality is a universal human trait.

# A relativist may answer

- **Killing babies is right/wrong**, judged by the moral standards of the particular culture.
- **Killing babies is right/wrong**, according to our own particular standards, which does not apply to agents in some other cultural context.
- **“Rational reconstruction” is not possible:** 'explaining' the differences in morality has no moral implications, 'rationality' is yet another culturally situated evaluative standard.

# Can the disagreement be rationally resolved?

- **Realist:** Yes, by rational, disinterested reflection with access to the relevant objective facts, agreement will necessarily be reached.

Rachels, page 21: “We agree that we shouldn't eat grandma; we disagree about whether the cow could be grandma.” and “The difference is in our belief systems, not in our values.”

- **Relativist:** Not necessarily, we can only judge an act in the specific cultural context, not from the 'outside', since we as moral agents are products of our context.

# Universal rule against lying?

- **A society which does not value honesty cannot exist, since the nature of communication is truthfulness.** (Rachels, page 21)
- "Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires."(Augustine, *Confessions*, I. 8.)
- "That philosophical concept of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions. But one can also say that it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours."  
Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, § 2

# References

- Rachels, chapter 2
- Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/>), entries on
  - Moral relativism
  - Moral skepticism
  - Moral realism
  - Moral anti-realism