



# The Moral Relativism/Universalism Debate

## Positions

### *Moral Universalism*

There is a single true morality that applies to all individuals and groups, regardless of their beliefs, traditions, practices, sentiments, etc.

### *Moral Relativism*

The truth or falsity of moral judgements depends on the beliefs, traditions, practices, sentiments etc. of individuals or groups.

### *Moral Nihilism*

There is no moral truth at all.

## Arguments for (Cultural) Moral Relativism

- *Moral Disagreement*: People in different cultures widely disagree about moral matters. The best explanation of this disagreement is provided by moral relativism.
- *Folk Metaethics*: Many lay persons affirm relativism. Hence, it is likely that our moral concepts and judgements refer to relative moral facts (as claimed by relativism and denied by universalism).
- *Cultural Imperialism*: Adhering to moral relativism decreases the risk of one culture imposing its moral views on other cultures even though they are not true.

## Arguments against (Cultural) Moral Relativism

- *Counterintuitive Moral Judgements*: According to relativism, if a culture believes that murder/rape/genocide/etc. is permissible this means that within this culture murder/rape/genocide/etc. is in fact permissible. But we have stronger reasons to believe that murder/rape/genocide/etc. are not permissible than to believe that relativism is true.
- *Moral Criticism*: If relativism is true then we cannot criticize other cultures for their moral views. All we can say is that according to *our* moral perspective, what they do is wrong.
- *Moral Fallibility*: If relativism is true then cultures cannot make moral mistakes. Whatever is their dominant moral view is always true (even if it is the view that murder/rape/genocide/etc. are permissible).
- *Moral Progress*: If relativism is true then there cannot be any cross-cultural moral progress. There can only be progress from the perspective of particular cultures (in the sense that more people within this culture believe its dominant moral views).
- *Moral Pioneers*: If relativism is true then moral pioneers (such as Martin Luther King) do not deserve praise but blame. After all, their moral views contradicted those of the majority, and would therefore have to be considered false.