

Ethical Relativism

by [Matt Slick](#) By CARM (Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry)

Ethical relativism is the position that there are no moral absolutes, no moral right and wrongs. Instead, right and wrong are based on social norms. Such could be the case with "situational ethics," which is a category of ethical relativism. At any rate, ethical relativism would mean that our morals have evolved, that they have changed over time, and that they are not absolute.

One advantage of ethical relativism is that it allows for a wide variety of cultures and practices. It also allows people to adapt ethically as the culture, knowledge, and technology change in society. This is a good and valid form of relativism.

The disadvantage of ethical relativism is that truth, right and wrong, and justice are all relative. Just because a group of people think that something is right does not make it so. Slavery is a good example of this. Two hundred years ago in America, slavery was the norm and morally acceptable. Now it is not.

Relativism also does not allow for the existence of an absolute set of ethics. Logically, if there are no absolute ethics, then there can be no Divine Absolute Ethics Giver. Requiring an absolute set of ethics implies an Absolute Ethics Giver, which can easily be extrapolated as being God. This would be opposed to ethical relativism. Therefore, ethical relativism would not support the idea of an absolute God, and it would exclude religious systems based upon absolute morals; that is, it would be absolute in its condemnation of absolute ethics. In this, relativism would be inconsistent, since it would deny beliefs of absolute values.

Furthermore, if ethics have changed over time, there is the problem of self-contradiction within the relativistic perspective. 200 years ago slavery was socially acceptable and correct. Now it is not. There has been a change in social ethics in America regarding this issue. The problem is that if slavery becomes acceptable again in the next 200 years, who is to say if it is right or wrong? We would have a contradictory set of right and wrong regarding the same issue. To this I ask the question, does truth contradict itself? (But this gets into the discussion of the nature of [truth](#).)

Within ethical relativism, right and wrong are not absolute and must be determined in society by a combination of observation, [logic](#), social preferences and patterns, experience, emotions, and "rules" that seem to bring the most benefit. Of course, it goes without saying that a society involved in constant moral conflict would not be able to survive for very long. Morality is the glue that holds a society together. There must be a consensus of right and wrong for a society to function well. Ethical relativism undermines that glue.

It seems to be universal among cultures that it is wrong to murder, to steal, and to lie. We see that when individuals practice these counterproductive ethics, they are soon in prison and/or punished. Since ethics are conceptual in nature, and there are some ethics that seem to transcend all cultures (be true for all societies)