

Advantages and Shortcomings of Conventionalism

by John Lumsden



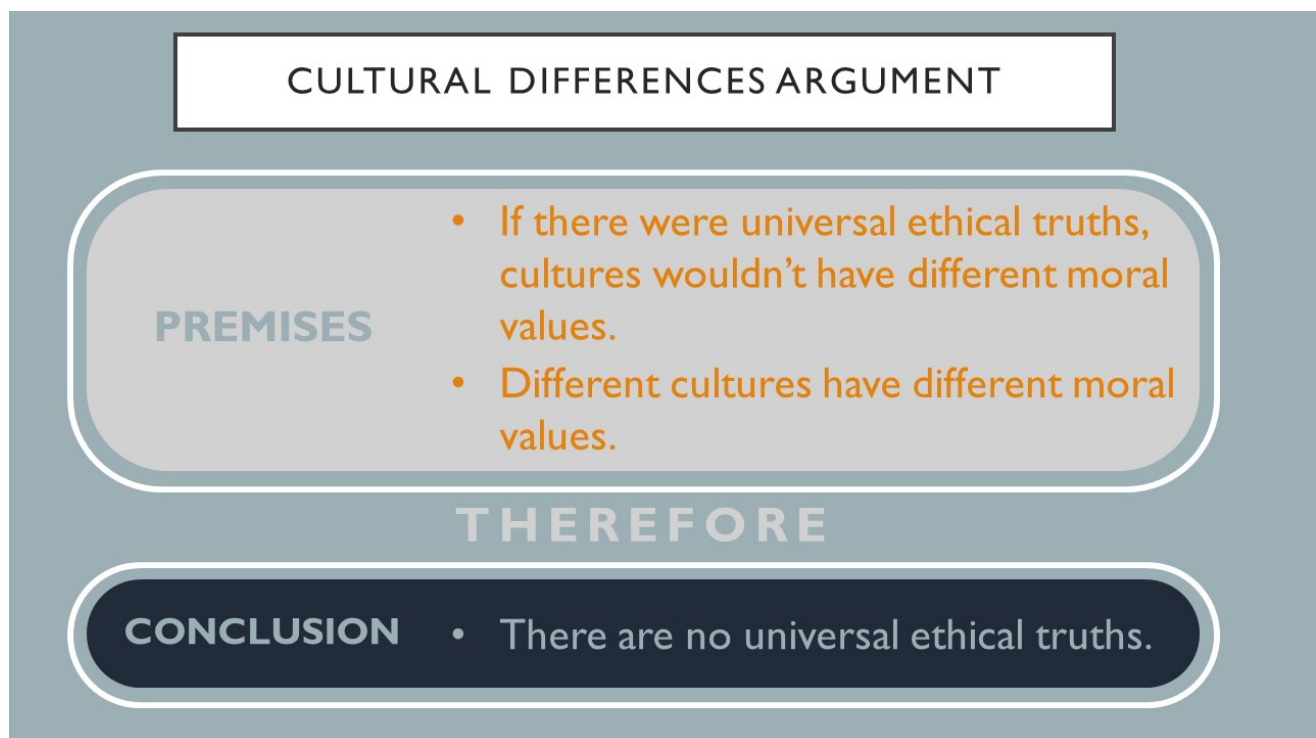
WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will be looking at the kinds of ethical evaluations that conventionalism makes, and considering if we agree with them or not. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Review of the Cultural Difference Argument

To begin with, recall that conventionalism is a relativist theory of ethics that maintains that what is good is determined relative to a society, convention, or culture. On this account, no society or culture is better than another.

A popular way to support conventionalism is to appeal to the cultural differences argument, which goes like this:



This seems like a powerful argument. But the first premise is false. Differences or disagreements across cultures don't indicate that there can't be any universal ethical values. We can disagree about things and still

have there be a truth to the matter.



BIG IDEA

As you can see, a conventionalist can't prove relativism by showing that various cultures have different values.

2. Intuitiveness of Conventionalism

Like most ethical theories, the ethical evaluations of conventionalism sometimes make sense to us and sometimes don't. In other words, conventionalism can provide intuitive and counterintuitive results.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In most of Europe it's conventional to have universal health care. For this reason, the conventionalist will say it's right that health care should be freely available for all in Europe. If you're European, this will likely be an intuitive result.

A European in the United States might find some of the conventions counterintuitive. For instance, most people are allowed to own guns in America. The conventionalist will say that this is fine within this culture. This would seem wrong to the visitor.

But if the visitor was a conventionalist, then they would not judge the allowance of gun ownership. This is because a conventionalist thinks that standards of judgment are relative to a culture. On this account you can't judge one culture by the standards of another.

This stance might seem counterintuitive, though. That's because we sometimes want to say that someone did something wrong, even if it's accepted in their culture.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In some countries, primarily in Northern Africa, the practice of female genital mutilation (or "female circumcision") is common. Most people think this is a brutal and oppressive practice that we should all agree needs to be stopped (since 2012 this has been considered a human rights violation by the United Nations).

If you're a conventionalist, then you will say we shouldn't judge this practice because it's a culturally relative one. For those that want to stop violence against women, this doesn't make much sense.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of the cultural differences argument**, highlighting that this argument doesn't work because one of its premises is false. Then we considered the **intuitiveness of conventionalism**, looking at examples of where the ethical evaluations of conventionalism make sense to us, and where they don't.

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