

Categorizing Ethical Theories

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will consider some of the main ways that ethical theories can relate to the idea of ethical truths. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Objectivism and Relativism
2. Types of Relativism
3. Objectivist and Relativist Commitments

1. Objectivism and Relativism

When you're thinking about the morality of actions you can choose from many different ethical theories or frameworks. The various theories come under one of two groups: **objectivism** holds that there are moral truths that everyone should accept and **relativism** states that this is not the case. We refer to these groups as descriptors.

To see more clearly the contrast between these two descriptors, consider the following situation and the different commitments the objectivist and relativist reveal in their responses.

A family cannot afford to pay their mortgage, but they have nowhere to go and refuse to be evicted

OBJECTIVIST	RELATIVIST
<p>The objectivist could offer a universal moral judgment, e.g. "stealing is only permissible if it is needed for survival."</p> <p>The creditor should thus allow the family to remain in the property (assuming they need to for survival).</p>	<p>The morality of occupying a property without payment is relative to the person(s) making the judgment.</p> <p>The creditor and the family may make different judgments, but there is no way to make sure everyone agrees.</p>

But just because the objectivist thinks that everyone should agree to the truth of a certain moral judgment, it does not mean that everyone must act in the same way.

➔ **EXAMPLE** If a wealthy banker accepted the objectivist's claim we just considered (that stealing is only permissible if it is needed for survival), then they should not commit fraud in order to buy a second holiday home.

Whereas the family would be morally justified in acquiring a property without their own funds, the banker would not be morally justified in acquiring a property without their own funds. But this does not mean we have fallen into relativism. It is just that the same universal ethical truth will give different duties under different circumstances.



DID YOU KNOW

The public figure and author Ayn Rand called her own theory objectivism. But we need to be careful here because her position is actually a form of relativism rather than objectivism as we are discussing it here.



TERMS TO KNOW

Objectivism

An approach to ethics that maintains that there are at least some universal ethical truths.

Relativism

An approach to ethics that maintains that there are no universal ethical truths.

2. Types of Relativism

Relativism can be further divided into two more descriptors. Both claim that the truth of moral judgments doesn't apply to all people, but **subjectivism** says they are relative to specific persons, whereas **conventionalism** says they are relative to a specific group of persons.

A conventionalist will claim, for instance, that a moral judgment is justified by the community we live in.

IN CONTEXT

Let's say that your community thinks that non-monogamous relationships are morally preferable. If you were a conventionalist belonging to this community, you would not say that people outside your community ought to follow this ideal as well. You would just say that this standard applies to your community alone.

It should be noted that the conventionalist position goes against some of our basic assumptions. Someone's home culture feels familiar, whereas a foreign culture feels unfamiliar. Unfortunately, we often associate what is familiar with what is right, and what is unfamiliar with what is wrong. Thus we implicitly take our own culture to be the one moral standard by which all others should be measured.

A subjectivist will go even further than the conventionalist and say that a moral judgment is only to be justified by a single person, without need of support by a community.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Imagine you think that happiness is the highest moral standard. As a subjectivist you do not expect that everyone should take up this stance. If your friend thought that perfecting her abilities and skills was the highest moral aim, even if it brings unhappiness and struggle, you would accept it as someone else's morality.



TERMS TO KNOW

Subjectivism

A relativist approach to ethics that maintains that ethical truths are relative to the individual.

Conventionalism

A relativist approach to ethics that maintains that ethical truths are relative to convention, society, or culture.

3. Objectivist and Relativist Commitments

Now that you have seen how different ethical evaluations come under the descriptors objectivism and relativism, let's see how a specific situation can contain elements of both.



TRY IT

Consider the following situation.

HOW WOULD THE OBJECTIVIST AND THE RELATIVIST ACT?

A police officer pulls a car over for running a stop sign.



The driver offers to pay off the police officer to let her go without a ticket.

In this situation the objectivist may be committed to not taking the payoff because they believe no one ought to take bribes. The relativist may say that the moral obligation to not take payoffs is relative to each individual, and that they do not follow this obligation.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by looking at **objectivism** and **relativism** and seeing that all ethical theories come under one of these two descriptors. We then distinguished **two types of relativism**, subjectivism and conventionalism. Finally, a specific situation was considered and the **objectivist** and **relativist commitments** were identified.

Source: Stop Sign Image, Public Domain, <http://bit.ly/2btXJlr>



TERMS TO KNOW

Conventionalism

A relativist approach to ethics that maintains that ethical truths are relative to convention, society, or culture.

Objectivism

An approach to ethics that maintains that there are at least some universal ethical truths.

Relativism

An approach to ethics that maintains that there are no universal ethical truths.

Subjectivism

A relativist approach to ethics that maintains that ethical truths are relative to the individual.