

Problems with Conventionalism

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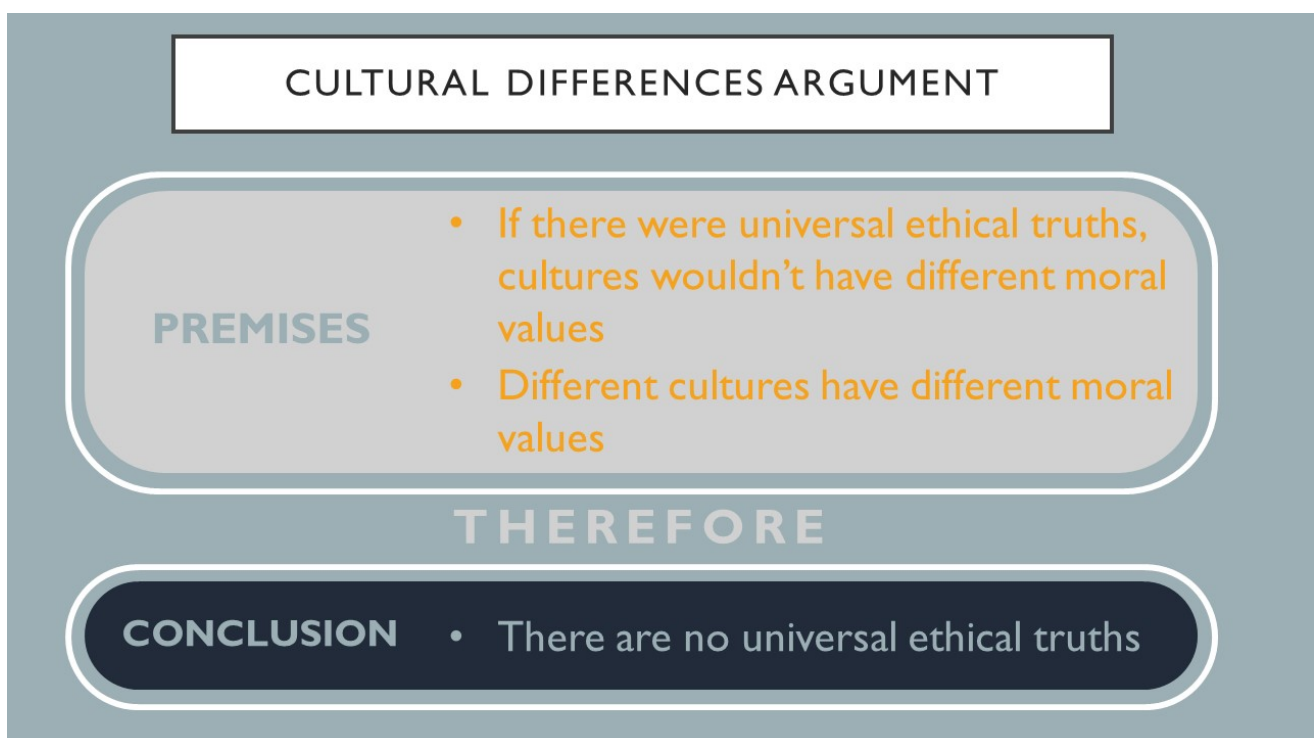
WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will focus on one of the arguments most commonly used in favor of conventionalism, before considering some other difficulties the conventionalist might run into. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Analysing the Cultural Differences 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. The argument goes like this.



This seems like a powerful argument. But let's look a bit more closely. How might you start to evaluate this argument?



Two of the ways you can evaluate an argument is by asking if the premises are true and by asking if the premises can support the conclusion. In other words, you can see if it's sound and if it's valid.

Let's say you start by asking if it's valid. Recall that an argument is valid if, assuming the premises are true, the conclusion is also necessarily true. The cultural differences argument is valid. This is because, if we assume (1) cultures wouldn't disagree about morality if there were universal ethical truths, and (2) that cultures do in fact disagree, then it follows logically that there are no universal ethical truths.

Now let's ask if it's sound. Recall that a sound argument is one that is both valid and all the premises are true. The second premise (different cultures have different moral values) seems true. But the first premise is more questionable. In the next section we will see why.

2. Does Disagreement Prove Relativism?

The first premise of the cultural differences argument basically says moral disagreement shows there isn't any objective morals that we could all agree to. But this doesn't seem true. That's because we can disagree and there still be a truth of the matter.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine that we disagree about how the universe started. Let's say I think the universe has always been there and so doesn't have a beginning; whereas you think the universe began with a big bang.

Just because we disagree, it doesn't mean there isn't a correct answer to the question whether the universe had a beginning or if it's always been there. We just don't have conclusive evidence yet.

The fact that we disagree doesn't necessarily mean neither of us has gotten the objective truth. It can mean that just one of us has failed to get the objective truth. In this case, we don't have to accept that disagreement is the end of the story. We can still hold open the idea that one of us is right and one of us is wrong.

As you can see, the conventionalist is wrong to think disagreement means there is no objective truth. Even when it comes to very difficult issues that can't be answered, disagreement still doesn't mean there isn't objective truth.

➔ **EXAMPLE** People disagree about whether or not there is a life after this one. We can't prove there *is* an afterlife any more than we can prove there *isn't* one. The very meaning of an afterlife is that it isn't something that can be experienced in this life—after all, it comes *after* this life. But just because we can't prove it one way or another, doesn't mean there isn't a truth of the matter. Either there is an afterlife or there isn't. One of the answers must be true.

Again, this shows that conventionalism is wrong to think disagreement establishes there are no objective truths. And this means that it's also wrong to say that anyone's view is as justified as anyone else's.

3. Further Problems

One of the consequences of what we've said, is that a culture isn't necessarily justified in its beliefs. A

conventionalist might give a very accurate picture of the morals of a specific culture or society, but it doesn't mean that these morals ought to be followed.

➞ **EXAMPLE** It used to be accepted in many countries that a man could force himself on his wife, and it wasn't classified as rape.

Today, most people would say that this was wrong. In a similar way, it used to be thought that poor people shouldn't be allowed to vote, but now this is widely rejected. Just by pointing out differences in ethical views, then, you can't justify those views.

A final possible problem for the conventionalist is that it appears there are in fact some agreements across cultures. For instance, most societies say that killing is wrong. But a conventionalist might say examples like this don't count. They could argue that the prohibition against killing isn't an ethical truth, but just a way for humans to survive.



THINK ABOUT IT

All animals eat to survive. But would you say that animals make an ethical decision when they eat in order to survive?

If the only reason humans don't kill each other is to survive, it also doesn't seem like an ethical decision. Rather, it seems like it's just something that we do as the kind of animals we are.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by **analyzing the cultural difference argument**. Although it's clearly valid, it wasn't obviously sound. The soundness of the argument was evaluated by looking at its second premise and asking **does disagreement prove relativism?** We answered "no" to this question because there can still be a truth of the matter even if we don't agree. Finally, some **further problems** were considered, as was a potential response from the conventionalist.