



15 Moral Relativism Examples

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MORAL RELATIVISM

Moral relativism is a view that rejects the existence of any objective, absolute or universal moral truths that govern our morality.

EXAMPLE: TAX AVOIDANCE

Tax avoidance isn't technically illegal. So here, we have a moral relativist debate:

- Some people believe that we all need to pay taxes in good faith for the good of society.
- Other people look at the government as the people who are engaging in morally outrageous behavior. How dare they take 40% of my income every week!

EXAMPLE: WEALTH

During the reformation, the Catholics and Protestants had competing views on whether it's moral to pursue personal wealth:

- The Catholics believed that the pursuit of wealth was a sign of worshiping money over God.
- The protestants believed working hard was good and becoming wealthy was a sign of blessings from God for your hard work.

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Moral relativism is a view that rejects the existence of any objective, absolute or universal moral truths that govern our morality.

Instead, moral relativism, and moral relativists, argue that what is moral hinges on where a person is situated, and the context in which the person lives that determines what they take as moral conduct or behavior.

In other words, what you consider to be moral depends entirely on who you are and the cultural context in which you were raised.



Moral relativism is in opposition to moral objectivism, which maintains that there are objective and absolute moral truths that stand irrespective of where a person is situated in relation to such truths. By contrast, for the moral relativist, morality is only *what we think is moral*, not based on a fundamental rule that works for all.

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15 Examples Of Moral Relativism

1. Eating Pork

In Judaism, there is a rule against eating any animal that does not have split hooves and/or does not chew their cud.

[Leviticus 11:13](#) says, “You may eat any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud... And the pig, though it has a split hoof completely divided, does not chew the cud; they are unclean for you.”

For people that believe in Judaism, eating pork is *wrong*, and violates an objective moral standard that was bestowed upon them by their God.

If you were to ask someone of another religion whether they agreed with Jewish people that eating pork is wrong, they would be able to concede that it is wrong

—for Jewish people.



They cannot however say that it is wrong on any objective or universal level.

The non-Jewish person is perfectly okay with eating pork!

This is precisely what distinguishes moral relativism from other moral systems; what is wrong is contingent on where the person stands relative to what he or she considers to be wrong.

Jewish people objectively believe that eating pork is wrong and violates a universal moral truth (as dictated by their god).

Through the perspective of moral relativism, we can see how Jewish people would take a religious law as the *Truth*, but also that others don't see it that way.

Here, we see how belief is contingent on where that person is situated in the world (from a geographical, cultural and historical context.)

Related: [Cultural Relativism](#)

2. Tardiness

Scenario: Sam and Andrew are good friends, but Sam knows that Andrew is always late whenever they make plans to do something. Sam thinks it's wrong that Andrew is such a tardy person; whereas Andrew doesn't think much of it at all, and he thinks that Sam is being overly sensitive.

If we entertain this scenario from the perspective of moral relativism, what might we conclude about Andrew's behavior?



We could say that Andrew's behavior is wrong; however, we would not say it is wrong in an objective sense.

Rather, we can say that Andrew's behavior is wrong, *according to Sam*, who views Andrew's behavior as wrong, (given where Sam is situated in the context of the world, and where he stands in relation to Andrew).

3. Veganism

Some people live a vegan lifestyle because they consider it wrong to eat animals since animals are sentient creatures that are capable of experiencing pleasure and pain.

However, the majority of the world doesn't see things this way. Most people happily eat meat and have no moral objection to it. This is because they do not believe that causing pain to animals is a moral problem.

Here, we run across the issue of moral relativism: depending on a person's stance, something is either perfectly fine or very immoral, and it's hard to find an objective moral absolute here. It's up to the individual to decide what is and isn't moral in the situation based upon their fundamental belief system.

4. Repaying Credit Card Bills



I have a friend who moved from England to Australia and left his credit card debts behind. He simply stopped paying them and the Credit Card companies couldn't track him down as he didn't provide a forwarding address.

We had a debate about the morality of this situation and neither of us could change the other's mind. From his perspective, he wasn't doing harm to anyone. It was a victimless action. The credit card companies are enormous and his small act did not affect their profitability or cause any harm to any individual.

Yet, from my perspective, he had engaged in a good-faith agreement with the credit card company and it was his moral duty to fulfill that agreement. In the court of law, the judge would likely agree with me. But from his moral standpoint, he had done nothing wrong. We were on different sides of a moral divide.

5. Tax Avoidance

Tax avoidance isn't technically illegal but many people frown upon it. And yet, people who engage in it argue they're standing up against the moral outrage of being taxed too much!

Here, we come across another example of moral relativism.

On the one side are the people who believe that we live in a society and we all need to honestly and in good faith pay taxes on what we earn. If we make more money, we should contribute more back to society.



On the other side, we have people who look at the government as the people who are engaging in morally outrageous behavior. How dare they take 40% of my income every week! I could use that money to help my family!

As a result, they do things like take cash payments for services so it cannot be traced, set up offshore bank accounts, or hire accountants to find legal loopholes so they can keep more of their money.

6. Conspicuous Consumption

In capitalist societies, conspicuous consumption, or extreme spending on high-ticket and lavish items, is seen as a sign of wealth and status. But in other societies, it is seen as cockiness and self-adulation.

Some philosophers are of the opinion that conspicuous consumption is morally wrong and abhorrent given that there are so many people around the world that are in need.

[Peter Singer](#) is a philosopher known for his views on [animal rights and Utilitarianism](#). According to Singer, when we find ourselves in a position to help someone in need—even if helping this person comes at a cost to ourselves—we face a moral obligation to do so.

Moral relativism would state that we only have a moral obligation if we *think* we have it. In other words, if you don't *feel* morally obliged, then you aren't!

Singer, by contrast, would likely claim that there is a moral obligation independent of whether or not we take there to be one.

7. Tipping The Server



Where I grew up in Australia, there was no tipping because it was believed that the employer should pay the server a living wage. When I moved to Canada, I quickly learned that if I didn't tip, I was [breaking a taboo!](#)

Here, we can see a contextual divide in morality. For me, I thought the moral duty was for the employer to pay the server's wage through the fee written on the restaurant menu. In my new society, it was believed that the moral duty was for the customer to directly pay the server's wage *on top of* the fee written on the menu.

It's hard to say there's a moral absolute here. Rather, morality emerges from what society agrees upon and not a fundamental rule that can span all cultures. In true moral relativist style: morality is only *what we think is moral*, not based on a fundamental rule that fits for all.

8. Believing In The Wrong God

The plight of the atheist and other religious groups throughout history is another example of moral relativism in action. Some societies have gone as far as hanging people for believing in the wrong god!

Here, we have people who, in good faith and all sincerity, have the belief that there is no god or their god is different from the god of the majority.



In some societies, these people have been seen as living a thoroughly immoral life. In fact, during periods such as the Spanish Inquisition, they have been run out of town – or worse!

And yet, in most societies today, religious pluralism, [cultural pluralism](#), and secularism have defended people's rights to worship their own Gods.

We see moral relativism at work when comparing societies: Spain during the Spanish inquisition has one moral position and today's liberal societies have a completely different one.

The moral positions of each society are true only within their relative contexts.

9. Seeking Wealth

Different religious sects have, over time, had competing views on whether it's moral to pursue personal wealth.

One quintessential example of this is the divide between the Catholics and the Protestants during the reformation. The Catholics believed that the pursuit of wealth was a sign of worshiping money over God. Instead, the focus was on acts of service.

The protestants developed their own value system based on an alternate reading of the bible that came to be known as the protestant work ethic. This involved a new way of looking at working hard and earning money. Protestants were encouraged to be entrepreneurs and create wealth because being wealthy was a sign of blessings from God.



Here, we see how two different interpretations of the same text lead to competing moral ideas. It is an argument for the idea that morality doesn't necessarily come from some universal ideas that transcend cultures, but rather comes from subjective interpretations.

10. Unfairness In Nature

When we look at animals, we see a lot of confronting things. We see wolves hunting down weak and defenseless deer and animals eating their own young.

There is plenty that happens in nature that we humans would consider morally objectionable. And yet, when we look at nature, we don't see it as immoral. We see it as simply the circle of life.

Here, we're applying moral relativism and looking at morality in a contextual way. In the context of humans, who have the capacity to moralize, we see doing harm to others as immoral. But when we look to animal situations, the same behaviors are not seen as immoral because it is simply nature taking its course.

11. Plato's Euthyphro's Dilemma

The Euthyphro Dilemma can be found in Plato's dialogue, [Euthyphro](#). This is a tough example but it comes to the core of moral relativism. It asks whether morality is universal or subjective.

The dilemma is as follows:



Socrates: “[Is what is] pious or holy beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods?”

The Euthyphro Dilemma poses the question of whether there exists objective moral truths, or whether morality is relative to how we see it.

First, Socrates asks, “Is what is holy beloved by the gods *because* it is holy?”

In other words, do we see something as moral due to good fundamental reasons that it is moral (independent of that behavior or moral conduct)? Did morality come before our perceptions?

Alternatively, Socrates poses a second question: “Or is it holy because is it beloved by the gods?”

Here, he asks whether we consider things to be moral (or holy) only because we (or God) says so? In other words, is something moral simply because we view it as such? Is our perception the only thing that makes it moral?

12. Ayn Rand’s Objectivism

Ayn Rand is a philosopher and writer who embraces individualism over [collectivism](#). She believes that you have a duty only to yourself

and not your fellow man. Others think she is completely wrong, and that we have a duty of care to our community.



In an appendix of Rand's novel [Atlas Shrugged](#), Rand writes:

“My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.”

According to Rand, the only moral obligation that we have is to ourselves. We should attain our own individual happiness and not think about anything else.

Many philosophers, and people in general, disagree with Rand, mostly because the implications of her views are problematic, and she is outspokenly against [altruism](#) as a form of moral value.

These people would not necessarily disagree with Rand; rather, they would say that Rand, and those that espouse her beliefs, are selfish.

13. Being Accountable

Scenario: A good friend that I haven't seen in a while invited me over for dinner. I'd go if I were in the mood, but I'm just not feeling like it right now so I'm going to stay home instead.

In our friendships with other people, [accountability](#), or being reliable, is generally seen as an important and valued trait.



In this scenario, someone who believes in the importance of being accountable and staying true to your word might advise the person to go to the dinner—since that is what they said they would do, and because they are friends with the person they've arranged plans with.

Furthermore, it would be inconsiderate towards the friend, since presumably that friend would have prepared dinner, scheduled time and made the arrangements for dinner. For the friend to bail just because they weren't in the mood seems like an inconsiderate thing to do, and something that we (especially the friend of this person,) would want say is wrong.

As we've seen from the previous examples, moral relativism is capable of agreeing that to bail on the friend is wrong, considering their relationship and their framework of what is moral.

The stipulation is that they would not say it is wrong in any objective sense; instead, it is wrong *because* they see it as wrong.

14. Returning The Shopping Cart

Many people consider it common courtesy to return the shopping cart to its proper place once they're finished shopping. Some people leave the cart wherever it happens to be once they've finished using it.



Bringing back the shopping cart to where it belongs is a small inconvenience that benefits other shoppers and store workers as a whole. We could argue that given the relatively low cost it has on the person to return it, and the benefit it provides to others, the moral thing to do to is return the cart to where it belongs.

But many people don't return the cart, thinking it's the responsibility of the supermarket to employ somebody to do it for them.

Relativists would agree that it is a moral behavior only so long as the person sees it as moral.

Other non-relativists would say that there are reasons that exist independent of the shopper that tell us returning the shopping cart is the right thing to do.

15. Finding A Wallet

Suppose you are on a walk and happen to find someone's wallet on the ground. You pick up the wallet and look inside and realize that it has all the person's identification documents, cash and credit cards.

Most people would tell you that the right thing to do would be to return the wallet to its owner. Some people might tell you (perhaps Ayn Rand) that you should keep the wallet and store the cash.

The moral relativist would tell you that you should do what you think is right. Whatever you feel is right, as it turns out, is the right thing for you to do.

Read Next: [Examples of Morals and Ethics](#)

Conclusion



When we view things from the perspective of moral relativism, we can see that different people across cultures and geographic locations hold different values [and worldviews](#). Moral relativism recognizes that there is a plurality of values, and that these values are true for people that see them as legitimate.

On the flipside—some resist moral relativism because it avoids answering the question of ‘what is moral?’, by denying the premise that there are moral truths we can speak of in the first place.

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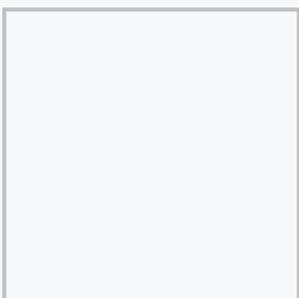
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