Ethical Relativism, Absolutism & Pluralism

- Who’s to judge what’s right or wrong?… or are the Eskimos cruel if they allow old people to starve?

“Hold it—we almost forgot his benefits package.”
Ethical relativism defined

- The moral rightness and wrongness of actions varies from society to society.

There are **no** absolute universal moral standards binding on all people at all times.
Ethical absolutism defined

- There are non-overridable moral principles that ought never to be violated, e.g.

  - “Always tell the truth.”
Ethical pluralism defined

- The truth is not singular or unitary in nature. There are many truths and sometimes they conflict. Disagreement on ethical issues may be positive.
  - At times justice should be tempered with mercy
Assumptions of ethical relativism

- Diversity assumption—what is morally right varies from society to society. There are no moral principles accepted by all societies.

- Dependency assumption—acts are right or wrong depending on the nature of society. We are culturally determined beings.
Extreme ethical relativism

- Morality is dependent on each individual, not on society.
- Concepts of right and wrong have no meaning among disagreeing individuals.
Why is ethical relativism so popular?

- Many think the only choices are relativism and absolutism
- Fear of charges of ethnocentrism
- Some feel neutrality is essential in approaching ethical questions
Moral pluralism

- A “right” answer to moral problems does not necessarily mean adherence to completely unbending absolutes.

- If a moral principle applies to all people everywhere, then relativism is false.
Possible universal ethical principles

- It is wrong to torture people for fun.
- Killing innocents is wrong.
- Rape is wrong.
- Keep promises and contracts.
- Do not deprive another of freedom.
- Do justice by treating equals equally.
- Tell the truth.
Why might pluralism be preferable to relativism or absolutism?

- Ethics does not occur in a moral vacuum, it has do with the “good” flourishing by…
  - Ameliorating suffering
  - Promoting happiness
  - Resolving conflicts of interest
Dad, you said that we all decide morality for ourselves. But if that’s true and if you say something is right that I think is wrong does that make you immoral?

Of course not son, it makes you immoral. Now let’s go get some ice cream.