A Critique of Ethical Relativism
Some definitions

- **Ethical (or Moral) Absolutism** = belief that some moral principles apply to all societies at all times
- **Ethical (or Moral) Relativism** = doctrine that what is ethical or moral differs from society to society or person to person; thus, there are no absolute moral standards that apply to all men at all times
Louis Pojman (1935-2005)

- American philosopher
- Taught at many universities, including the University of Mississippi, the University of California at Berkeley, New York University, Oxford University, and the US Military Academy at West Point
- Wrote many books and articles, particularly on ethics and the philosophy of religion
Pojman notes several of the reasons for a gradual erosion of belief in moral objectivism and growing support for ethical relativism

- Rejection of ethnocentrism (i.e., uncritical belief in the superiority of one’s culture and values)
- Decline of religion in Western society; this has caused some people to think there could be no objective morality if God does not exist
- False dichotomy between Absolutism and Conventionalism (there are only two choices; if not Absolutism, then the only alternative is Conventionalism)
Ethical Relativism

- Ethical Relativism = idea that moral rightness and wrongness of actions vary from society to society so there are no universal moral standards or values held by all societies

- The Case for Ethical Relativism: two premises
  
  A. The Diversity Thesis (or cultural relativism) = Beliefs about right and wrong differ from society to society (or culture to culture).
  
  B. The Dependency Thesis = What is right or wrong for individuals to act in a certain way depends on the acceptance of the actions by the society or culture to which they belong

- Conclusion: There are no universally valid moral principles, objective standards which apply to all peoples at all times in history
Which of these two claims does Pojman criticize?

- The first claim – the Diversity Thesis – is hard to disprove. It is simply a statement of fact. Cultural relativism exists even if it does not “establish the truth of ethical relativism, for it could be the case that some cultures simply lack correct moral principles.”
- The second claim – the Dependency Thesis – is potentially the weaker argument
Pojman breaks down the Dependency Thesis further

- **The weak dependency thesis** = the idea that *applications or expressions* of moral beliefs or principles can differ across cultures.

- **The strong dependency thesis** = The moral belief or principles themselves are products of the culture and can differ from culture to culture (or from society to society).

- Pojman maintains that the relativist is going to have to demonstrate the validity of the strong dependency thesis. The relativist has to show that somehow all moral principles are essentially cultural decisions, the products of individual cultures.
If relativism is correct, this could mean one of two things:

- **Conventionalism** = The criteria for “right” and “wrong” are based on general or social convention. The rightness or wrongness of any action is judged in terms of its compliance with social norms or conventions.

- **Subjectivism** = “right” and “wrong” get their meaning from the individual only (morality is dependent on individuals, not the culture). Morality is “in the eye of the beholder.”
For Pojman’s criticism to have merit, he will have to show that both kinds of Ethical Relativism – Subjectivism and Conventionalism – are wrong

- **A. Subjectivism leads to absurd conclusions and ultimately to the demise of morality altogether**
  1. “Morality” has no meaning. It cannot resolve interpersonal conflict because it rests on neither some objective standard or even social convention.
  2. No interpersonal criticism or judgment is logically possible. On the basis of subjectivism, Hitler could be perceived to be as moral as Gandhi as long as each thought he was living according to his chosen beliefs or principles.
  3. How does it explain such things as a common language, common institutions, and other common things within a society?

- **B. Conventionalism collapses into Subjectivism**
  1. If morality simply is relative to each culture, then if a culture is not tolerant, its members have no reason to be tolerant.
  2. How do we determine what a society is? How large must a community or society be? Most societies today are comprised of many subcultures, and many of their members have different allegiances (religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, etc.)
  3. How is reform possible within a conventionalist system? Reformers often go against cultural standards (see abolitionists like Wilberforce opposing slavery, e.g.). People like Martin Luther King, Jr. Jesus, or Gandhi would be wrong since they went against culturally accepted values.
  4. No intercultural moral critique is possible.
Both forms of Ethical Relativism also make much of their promotion of tolerance. This, though, is a problem in at least two respects.

1. If Ethical Relativism entails tolerance, this means that it accepts that there is at least one objective moral value – tolerance. But this would mean that not all moral values are relative.

2. The ethical relativist cannot rationally criticize anyone who subscribes to what he might consider a morally objectionable belief or practice. “Hitler’s actions (so long as they are culturally tolerated) are as legitimate as Mother Theresa’s.”
Alternatives to Relativism

- **Moral Absolutism** = there is one or more universalizable moral principles that may never be violated
- **Moral Objectivism** = there is one or more universalizable moral principles that may occasionally be overridden by other moral principles
The case for moral objectivism

• 1. Human nature is relatively similar
• 2. Moral principles are functions of human needs and interests
• 3. Some moral principles promote human interests and needs better than others
• 4. Those principles that meet essential needs can be said to be valid moral principles (e.g., relieving human suffering, promotion of human flourishing, etc.)
The Hierarchy of Normative Principles

- **Primary Principles** = *general* normative principles which direct our actions within a given social context (e.g., The Golden Rule, truth-telling, or not killing innocent people)

- **Secondary principles** = *specific* normative principles which guide our actions within a given social context (e.g., opting for monogamy instead of polygamy; see p. 165 also)
Universalizable Principles (aka Primary Normative Principles)

1. Do not kill innocent people
2. Do not cause unnecessary pain or suffering (e.g., “it is morally wrong to torture people for the fun of it.”)
3. Do not lie or deceive
4. Do not steal or cheat
5. Keep your promises and honor your contracts
6. Do not deprive another person of his or her freedom
7. Be just, treating people as they deserve to be treated
8. Help other people, especially when the cost is minimal
Pojman’s heroes (moral saints)

- Fr. Maximilian Kolbe
- Socrates
- Jesus
- The early Christian martyrs
- Gandhi
- Mother Theresa
- Albert Schweitzer
- Martin Luther King, Jr.
- St Thomas More
- Admiral Stockdale (Vietnam War POW)
Characteristics of moral heroes (moral saints)

- 1. self-discipline and self-control
- 2. courage (e.g., Socrates at his trial and later)
- 3. Practical wisdom, insight, and understanding into the contingencies of the situations they fall into
- 4. A deep sense of personal responsibility, a willingness to be held accountable
- 5. A deep commitment to high moral ideals, encompassing altruism, devotion to one’s country, etc.
To sum up, here is the conclusion of Pojman’s argument for Moral Objectivism

- Objective moral principles are those adherence to which meets the needs and leads to the most significant benefits for people.
- Some principles are such that adherence to them can meet the needs of people and promote their flourishing.
- Thus, there are some objective moral values.