

Pros and Cons of Ethical Relativism

For

- It is a pluralist and tolerant position: we should certainly be relativist about many cultural behaviours
- It is in strong opposition to any form of cultural chauvinism
- Ethical values do not have to be located in some shadowy, intuited world or in the hands of a deity: they arise from our real-life interactions
- The *argument from sentience*: in a world with no sentient creatures, there would be no ethical values—morality only arises with agents interacting with one another in a social context
- “There is something conventional about *any* morality, so every morality really depends on a level of social acceptance.” (Pojman. *Ethics* 29)

Against

- It is self-contradictory: two mutually exclusive views can both be right. And “there are no objective truths” looks like an objective truth
- There is no possibility of moral action: everything must be tolerated. To intervene implies that there is some higher value
- All reformers—eg William Wilberforce, Rosa Parks, Christian martyrs, Jesus—*must* be wrong since they are going against prevailing values
- Disagreements about ethics don’t imply an absence of objective values any more than disagreements about facts imply an absence of physics
- The *argumentum ad Nazium*: some things just seem wrong. If the Nazis had won and promoted their values across Europe, would they now be right?
- There do, in fact, appear to be common objective moral values: incest, truth-telling, homicide, restitution, fairness, promise-keeping, etc
- It is difficult to determine what constitutes a ‘society’: the Ku Klux Klan? two terrorists in a room?—conventional relativism quickly collapses into subjectivism