



Cambridge  
Elements

Ethics

# Moral Relativism and Pluralism

David B. Wong



ISSN 2516-4031 (online)  
ISSN 2516-4023 (print)



# Cambridge Elements

Elements in Ethics

edited by

Ben Eggleston

*University of Kansas*

Dale E. Miller

*Old Dominion University, Virginia*

## MORAL RELATIVISM AND PLURALISM

David B. Wong

*Duke University*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,  
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of  
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781009044301](http://www.cambridge.org/9781009044301)

DOI: [10.1017/9781009044396](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009044396)

© David B. Wong 2023

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions  
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take  
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2023

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 978-1-009-04430-1 Paperback

ISSN 2516-4031 (online)

ISSN 2516-4023 (print)

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence  
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this  
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will  
remain, accurate or appropriate.

# Moral Relativism and Pluralism

Elements in Ethics

DOI: 10.1017/9781009043496  
First published online: January 2023

---

David B. Wong  
*Duke University*

**Author for correspondence:** David B. Wong, [dbwong@duke.edu](mailto:dbwong@duke.edu)

**Abstract:** The argument for metaethical relativism, the view that there is no single true or most justified morality, is that it is part of the best explanation of the most difficult moral disagreements. The argument for this view features a comparison between traditions that highly value relationship and community and traditions that highly value personal autonomy of the individual and rights. It is held that moralities are best understood as emerging from human culture in response to the need to promote and regulate interpersonal cooperation and internal motivational coherence in the individual. The argument ends in the conclusion that there is a bounded plurality of true and most justified moralities that accomplish these functions. The normative implications of this form of metaethical relativism are explored, with specific focus on female genital cutting and abortion.

**Keywords:** moral relativism, ethical theory, comparative philosophy, normative ethics, naturalistic ethics

© David B. Wong 2023

ISBNs: 9781009044301 (PB), 9781009043496 (OC)  
ISSNs: 2516-4031 (online), 2516-4023 (print)

# Contents

1	Why Are People So Exercised about Moral Relativism?	1
2	How Should Theses about Moral Relativism Be Framed?	2
3	Relationship and Community, Autonomy and Rights	3
4	Epistemic Reasons to Delve Further into the Conflict between Relationship-Centered and Rights-Centered Moralities	6
5	An Ethical Argument for Extended Inquiry into Rivals to One's Own Ethical Views	9
6	Overcoming Stereotypes of Relationship-Centered Moralities	13
7	Complicating the Contrast between Relationship- and Autonomy-Centered Moralities	18
8	The Underdiscussed Question of What Morality Is	22
9	A Naturalistic Approach to Understanding Why Human Beings Have Moralities	24
10	Putting Together Moral Ambivalence and a Naturalistic Conception of Morality	27
11	Constraints on the Range of Viable Moralities	28
12	The Social Construction of Morality: By the Individual or Group?	32
13	When People Differ in Their Moral Beliefs about an Issue, When Do They Actually Disagree?	37

14	Why We Have Different Beliefs in Metaethics	40
15	How Moral Reasons Enter into the Truth Conditions of Moral Judgments and Help Shape Our Moral Motivations	42
16	Summary of the Argument for a Pluralistic Form of Metaethical Moral Relativism	45
17	Confused Reasoning That Is Sometimes Attributed to Those Who Believe in Normative Moral Relativism	46
18	An Argument for Normative Moral Relativism That Is Contingent upon the Acceptance of Certain Values and the Adoption of Metaethical Moral Relativism	47
19	Why Normative Moral Relativism Cannot Be a Simple Matter of Letting Others Be	48
20	What Is Female Genital Cutting?	49
21	Accommodation and the Fraught Issue of Abortion	53
22	Undermining Stereotypes of the Other Side	57
23	Fostering Pluralistic Encounters	59
24	Summary of Normative Moral Relativism	61
	References	62





## 1 Why Are People So Exercised about Moral Relativism?

Growing up Chinese American in the American Midwest, the ways of my family, including what was expected of me as a son, seemed painfully different from the ways of the families of my European American friends. Family seemed so much more important in my home. This did not mean that my European American friends had no responsibilities to their families, but in general, their duties rested upon their shoulders more lightly. My mother once said to me that she simply didn't understand (maybe she meant didn't approve of) the American obsession with happiness. She thought the most important thing was to fulfill one's responsibilities to others, and of course the weightiest ones were owed to family. I don't think she meant to deny the importance of a subjective sense of contentment (what I think she meant by "happiness"), but her point was that the subjective sense had to be earned through the performance of responsibilities, as best as one could. I respected her sentiments, and half of me agreed with her, but the other half wanted to be free to pursue happiness.

The question was about how I should live my life, and so it took on the greatest personal importance for me. When I began to take moral relativism seriously, some of those closest to me wondered whether I should find some other philosophical subject to write about. Many people think that moral relativism licenses any answer a person would be inclined to give, or any answer their society's culture gives. That is why "moral relativism" is often used as an epithet, a term of derision by people who assume that morality is a matter for reasoned judgment. I agree with this assumption, but depart from the oft-associated, but very different one that for any moral question there is a single correct answer to be found and that conflicting answers are incorrect. Others, and I am among them, have come to question the latter assumption by reflecting on the nature of moral disagreement. The kinds of disagreement that can be most effectively adduced in support of moral relativism typically involve values that come into conflict, each of which are compelling in their own right (consider liberty versus equality). The experience of moral conflict can be interpersonal, in which different sides have different views as to which value is most compelling given the circumstances. Conflict also can be intrapersonal. That is, one can be internally divided between two moral viewpoints, as was the case for me after my discussion with my mother.

The mere fact that people disagree, intrapersonally or interpersonally, is not in itself a reason to think that there isn't a single correct answer to be found. Insufficient evidence to resolve a disagreement is compatible with there being a single correct answer. The interpretive frameworks that people bring to assessing the evidence can differ markedly, producing conflicting views, but