

# Harman's Moral Relativism: A Critical Reflection

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## Abstract

The main contention of this paper is to show, how Gilbert Harman expresses his thoughts about the idea of moral relativism and also to explore the plausible responses that challenge his notion that moral judgments are relative and dependent on individual or cultural perspectives. Harman was a strong and influential defender of moral relativism and he was a leading voice in supporting and promoting this view, as well as his work had a substantial impact on the field of ethics and morality. Harman's relativism is characterized by its logical consistency, and as such, it requires careful consideration. Individuals hold diverse moral perspectives and principles. This diversity of moral opinions has led many to question whether there are any objective moral standards that apply to everyone. Many people disagree on moral issues, even within their own culture, especially across different cultures. Some people think this disagreement means there is no one "right" answer, and no universal moral truth that applies to everyone. Instead, they believe that moral beliefs are personal and vary from culture to culture, like a matter of taste. This paper intends to defend Harman's perspective on moral relativism and also to highlight the complexities and challenges inherent in this viewpoint.

**Keywords:** *Moral Relativism, Diversity, Morality, Moral Objectivity, Culture, Moral Absolutism, Moral Theory, Moral Framework.*

## Introduction:

Moral relativism is the view that what is considered right or wrong depends on the societal or cultural context. Moral relativists argue that moral standards are not universal but are shaped by a particular culture's shared values and customs. Therefore, what is considered morally acceptable or required is only relevant within that specific culture, and not applicable to individuals from other cultures. It's a major point to recognize that moral relativism is distinct from other philosophical positions: like, moral absolutism, which posits that certain actions are always right or wrong regardless of context, and the other one is moral nihilism, which rejects the existence of moral values altogether. Moral relativism occupies the middle ground, acknowledging that moral judgments are relative to cultural, historical, or personal perspectives, but still maintaining that moral values and principles have significance and importance.

Moral Absolutism asserts that certain actions are always right and wrong regardless of personal opinion or cultural variation. It believes in objective moral truths and claims that the single true morality applies to everyone, everywhere, at all times, and its principles are meant to be followed by all people. For instance, if this single true morality says “lying is wrong”, then lying is considered wrong for everyone, regardless of their circumstances or cultural background.

Moral Nihilism rejects the idea of moral truths altogether. It is the belief that there is no objective right or wrong, morality is not based on facts or truths. “An extreme version of nihilism holds that morality is simply an illusion: nothing is ever right or wrong, just or unjust, good or bad.”<sup>1</sup> Here we can’t know what is moral or immoral. In other words, nihilism argues that morality is not something that exists independently, but is instead a human construct with no basis in reality. This means that moral statements are simply personal opinions or cultural norms, without any universal validity. Moral nihilism thinks that morality is like a game without rules or a purpose. It’s like playing a game where no one knows the score, and there is no winner or loser. It considers morality a mere social construct, personal preference, or cultural habit, rather than a meaningful framework for guiding human behavior.

Moral Relativism on the other hand says that what’s right and wrong depends on the perspective or viewpoint of a person or culture. There is no one ‘right’ way to look at things, and all perspectives or viewpoints are equally legitimate. No single viewpoint is more important or correct than any other. What’s considered moral or immoral can vary greatly from person to person, culture to culture, or time to time. There is no universal moral truth that applies to everyone, everywhere. Instead, moral judgments are like personal opinions, and what’s true for one person might not be true for another. For instance, what’s considered rude in one culture might be considered polite in another culture, and what one person thinks is morally wrong, another person might think is perfectly fine, therefore, it claims that all the different perspectives are equally valid, and there’s no one right way to judge what’s moral or immoral.

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<sup>1</sup> Harman, G. (1977): *The nature of morality – An Introduction to Ethics*, Oxford University Press. P.11.

However, moral relativism disagrees with both the concept of moral absolutism and moral nihilism. As long as moral relativism thinks both these views are too extreme because they assume there's only one correct moral perspective (moral absolutism). Or, assume there's no moral perspective at all (moral nihilism). Instead, moral relativism says, there are many valid moral perspectives, and what's right or wrong depends on the context or culture. It further asserts that moral judgments are relative to the individual or group, and no single perspective is superior to others.

Moral relativism asserts that even though morality is relative and not absolute, it's still important and valuable. We shouldn't give up on morality altogether. Alternatively, moral relativism acknowledges that morality is not a fixed or objective truth. However, it argues that morality still has purpose and significance, even if it's relative to individual perspectives or cultural norms. Therefore, we should continue to engage with morality, make moral judgments, and strive to be moral, even if it's not based on absolute truths.

### **Harman on Moral Relativism:**

Gilbert Harman claims that “moral judgments about what is right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, virtue or vice, and so on, depend on the specific moral perspectives or set of principles that one chooses to support.”<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, it can be said that moral appraisals are always relative to a particular moral framework and can vary greatly depending on the cultural, historical, or personal context in which they are made. For instance, a pair of glasses, as the same object can look different through various lenses likewise, moral issues can appear differently depending on the moral framework you use to view them. This means that moral judgments are not absolute or objective but depend on the perspective you accept. Furthermore, “an action or decision considered morally acceptable or justifiable within one moral framework can be viewed as morally unacceptable or unjustifiable within a different moral framework.”<sup>3</sup> People can understand this view like a map, as we know the same location can have different directions depending on the map

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<sup>2</sup> Harman, G., and Thomson, J.J., (1996): *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, Blackwell Publishers, P.3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, P.3.

you use similarly, moral issues can have different moral judgments depending on the moral framework you apply. Therefore, Harman argues that “there is no single true morality. There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others.”<sup>4</sup>

People from diverse cultural backgrounds frequently hold contrasting views on what constitutes moral behavior, and consequently, their actions and decisions often reflect these varying beliefs. Alternatively, it can be said that different cultures have unique moral beliefs, these moral beliefs guide individual’s understanding of right and wrong. As a result, people from different cultures may behave in ways that seem unfamiliar or even contradictory to one another. Let’s use some simplistic examples to illustrate this idea, how people from different cultures greet each other. In some cultures, it’s customary to bow, while in others, it’s customary to shake hands or hug. These simple differences in greeting styles illustrate how cultural norms and values can vary greatly. The concept of marriage varies significantly across cultures, with different societies having their own unique customs and laws. For instance, in some societies, marriage is a sacred religious bond between two people. In others, it’s a legal contract between families or clans. Some cultures practice monogamy, while others allow polygamy. Same-sex marriage is accepted in some societies, while others prohibit it. In a broader sense, we can say that the way women are perceived, treated, and valued varies significantly across different cultures and societies, leading to a diverse range of experiences and opportunities for women. For instance, in some societies, women are seen as equals and leaders, with access to education and political power. In others, women’s roles are limited to domestic duties, and their autonomy is restricted. Some cultures prioritize women’s reproductive rights, while others control their bodies and choices. In some societies, women’s voices are amplified, while in others, they are silenced or marginalized. Various societies have differing moral standards, with some accepting and justifying practices like slavery and caste systems, while others condemn these same practices as deeply unjust and morally reprehensible. For instance, some societies have historically condoned slavery as a necessary economic institution. Others have implemented caste systems,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, P.8.

perpetuating social hierarchies and inequality. Yet, many societies have recognized the inherent dignity and equality of all individuals, rejecting slavery and caste systems as violations of human rights.<sup>5</sup>

It is highly doubtful that any significant moral values are endorsed by every single culture or society across the globe, without exception. As we know, what's considered "right" in one society might be deemed "wrong" in another, different cultures prioritize different values, like individualism vs. collectivism. Moreover, moral beliefs can evolve over time, leading to variations within and across societies. Moral diversity isn't just about different cultures having different beliefs. It's also about people within the same culture having strongly different moral views, leading to disagreements that can be very hard to resolve. Like, moral diversity is not about "us versus them"; it's also about "us versus us". Even within the same community, people can have strongly differing moral opinions. Fundamental moral disagreements often arise from conflicting core values or principles, rather than from differing facts or circumstances. To make it clear, it can be said that, people may agree on the facts but still disagree strongly on what is right or wrong because of their differing underlying values. Like, two people might agree on all the facts of a situation, but still have a strong moral disagreement because they prioritize different values. For example, one person might value individual freedom above all else, while another person values social justice. These differences in values lead to moral disagreement, even if they agree on the facts. Within the same community, or even within the same family, there can be individuals who hold vastly different moral beliefs about food choices. For instance, some people (vegetarians) believe it's morally wrong to consume meat or animal products, while others (non-vegetarians) see no issue with it. This is the existence of deep moral diversity, even among people who are geographically and rationally close.

Moral wrongness can vary from person to person, similar to how something beneficial for one individual may not be beneficial for another. Just as people have different needs, preferences, and circumstances, they also have different moral standards and values. What is considered morally wrong for one person may not be

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, P.8.

the same for someone else, just like, how a particular food or medicine can be good for one person but not for another. Suppose that, Tom and Sue bet on different horses in a race. Tom's horse performs well in rainy conditions, while Sue's horse struggles in the rain. In this case: Rain is beneficial (good) for Tom because it helps his horse win. On the other hand, Rain is harmful (bad) for Sue, because it hurts her horse's chances to win<sup>6</sup>. This is an example of evaluative relativity, where the same situation (rain) has opposite evaluations (good vs. bad) depending on the individual's goals and perspectives. It clarifies how the value or impact of something can vary greatly from person to person, depending on their unique circumstances, needs, and perspectives. It's all about individual perspectives and circumstances.

Therefore, for him, moral values and principles are not universal or objective but are shaped by individual or cultural perspectives. What is considered morally right or wrong can differ greatly across different cultures, historical periods, or personal beliefs. Moral relativism emphasizes that moral judgments are context-dependent and vary across different moral scenarios. When someone thinks something is right, it's only because it fits with their own personal values and moral beliefs and their own moral framework. Their moral framework is something like a map, which is shaped by their values, beliefs, and experiences. For instance, suppose that you're navigating with a GPS. What's "right" is the direction the GPS tells you to go, based on your current location and destination. However, someone else's GPS (their moral framework) might show a different "right" direction, based on their own values and beliefs. So, what's considered right is dependent on individual perspectives and values.

Many people believe that there is a basic set of moral rules that are widely accepted across different cultures and societies, which include: Don't harm or kill others, don't take things that don't belong to you (don't steal), tell the truth or don't lie to others. These rules are thought to be a core part of human morality, shared by people from different backgrounds and cultures. Michael Walzer's concept of universal prohibition is a moral rule that: Applies to everyone and everywhere. It

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, P.15.

forbids a specific action or behavior, and it allows for no exceptions or excuses. He says that there are a few moral rules that are universal, which means they apply to everyone and everywhere. These rules are: Don't murder, don't deceive (don't lie or cheat), don't betray (don't break trust), and don't be grossly cruel (don't treat others with extreme harshness). He leaves out "don't steal" because some societies don't believe in private property (personal ownership of things).<sup>7</sup> If a society doesn't think things can be owned, they won't have a concept of stealing. So, he doesn't include it in his list of universal prohibitions. Some societies might not have a concept of "mine" and "yours", so taking something wouldn't be considered wrong for them. However, harming or deceiving others is widely recognized as wrong across cultures, which is why he includes those in his list. He is saying that the concept of stealing only makes sense if a society recognizes private property. If a society doesn't believe in private property, then taking something that doesn't belong to you isn't considered stealing. Here he is pointing out that believing in private property will have rules against stealing because without those rules, private property wouldn't make sense. In other words, the concept of stealing relies on the idea that some things belong to specific people, and if that idea isn't part of a society's values, then stealing isn't a meaningful concept. Most societies don't have a complete ban on killing or harming others. Instead, they have specific rules and exceptions that govern when it's acceptable to harm or kill someone. For instance, many societies recognize self-defense, war, or capital punishment as justified reasons for killing or harming others. Some societies may also have cultural or religious practices that involve harming or killing animals or humans.

From a prevailing ethical understanding of morality, it can be argued that moral principles are universal and apply equally to all individuals, regardless of their personal beliefs, cultural background, or circumstances. In other words, it can be stated that many people believe that moral rules are like a set of instructions that everyone should follow, regardless of who they are or where they come from. From this perspective, people can assert that moral requirements are universal, objective, and absolute. As we already know, just because you think something is morally

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<sup>7</sup> Walzer, M. (1987): *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. P. 24

right or wrong, that does not mean everyone else agrees or has a good reason to follow those moral rules. For instance, you might think “stealing is wrong” and it’s a kind of moral rule that you follow. However, someone else might not think “stealing is wrong”, or they might have a different reason for thinking it is okay in certain situations. Therefore, just because you think stealing is wrong, that does not mean everyone else has to agree or follow that rule.

People are more likely to follow moral rules that match their own principles and values. This is because our reasons for doing something are based on what’s important to us as individuals. Alternatively, it can be said that people have compelling reasons to follow moral rules that suit their own beliefs and values. This is because our reasons and reasoning are personal and depend on our individual perspectives. Hence, your reason for doing something depends on your current thinking and information. If you had more information or could think more clearly, you might have different reasons. Moreover, your reasons are determined by your individual thinking process. Therefore, your reasons depend on what you know and how you think, and if you knew more or thought more clearly, then your reasons might change. Practical reasoning is a process that changes your perspective. The conclusions you reach through practical reasoning depend on your starting point, which includes your, initial desires (what you want), Goals (what you aim to achieve), Intentions (what you plan to do), Beliefs (what you think is true), Values (what matters most to you). If people have different priorities and values, they will have different reasons to do things, even if they agree on the facts.<sup>8</sup>

Some philosophers think that it’s possible to prove, with the help of objective reasoning, that there are certain fundamental moral principles that all rational individuals must accept and follow. These principles are considered universal and objective, which means they apply to everyone, regardless of personal beliefs or cultural differences. Kant and Gewirth tried to use logic and reason to prove that certain moral principles are absolute and universal. However, their arguments have been criticized and are not widely accepted as convincing proofs. Suppose that, you are in someone else’s situation, feeling their feelings and seeing

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<sup>8</sup> Harman, G. (1986): *Change in View: Principles of Reasoning*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Bradford Books/MIT Press. P.113.

things from their perspective. Now, go back to being yourself, but remember how the other person felt. Consider how your actions might affect the other person, and use that to decide what to do. If you don't consider the other person's interests in a situation, you are essentially saying they would not need to consider yours if the situation were reversed. Therefore, to be consistent and fair, you should consider their interests in the current situation. In other words, if you don't think about the other person's needs, you are implying they don't need to think about yours in a similar situation. If you would want them to think about your needs, then you should think about their needs too, to be fair and consistent.

Gewirth argues that People want freedom and well-being for themselves because they are rational. So, they must think others have the same right to freedom and well-being. However, they should not interfere with others' freedom and well-being either. He is using this argument to say that, as a rational being, people already believe in the importance of freedom and well-being for themselves, and so they should extend that belief to others as well.<sup>9</sup> Some philosophers and psychologists say that if someone does not follow basic moral rules, they are not just being bad, they are actually flawed as a person. For example, Nagel says that, if you don't think you should care about what others want or need, you are like a "practical solipsist". That means you are only thinking about yourself in your daily life, even if you know intellectually that others exist and have feelings too.<sup>10</sup>

The "objectivity principle" means that we should treat our thoughts and feelings as similar to others, viewed from a different angle. It's like looking at the same object from different sides but it's still the same object. Nagel uses this principle to argue that if we think we have reasons to do something, we should also think others have similar reasons, and vice versa. Nagel says, the objectivity principle seems to be true for many cases. If we don't follow this principle, we might fall into solipsism. Solipsism happens when we think our own feelings and thoughts are totally different from others, like, they belong to a different world.

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<sup>9</sup> Gewirth, A. (1977): *Reason and Morality* Chicago, Chicago University Press. P.249.

<sup>10</sup> Nagel, T. (1970): *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford. Oxford University Press. P.105.

Here, he is arguing for the importance of recognizing that our thoughts and feelings are similar to others, viewed from a different angle.<sup>11</sup>

Kohlberg says that people go through different levels of moral thinking, just like the steps on a ladder, and that the highest level is where people agree on basic moral principles. His idea is that as people grow and develop morally, they can reach the highest stage where they understand and agree on basic moral principles that are universal and apply to all humans. However, he also says that people who have not reached the highest level of moral thinking, where they understand and agree on universal moral principles, have an incomplete understanding of morality. Moreover, he believes that until people develop a more complete understanding of morality, which includes respecting universal principles like, fairness, kindness, and respect, their moral thinking is defective or incomplete. It's not that they are bad people but their moral understanding is still growing and developing.<sup>12</sup>

Judith Jarvis Thomson argues that, just because different cultures or individuals have varying moral beliefs (moral diversity), it doesn't necessarily mean that there is no universal moral truth (moral absolutism). Sometimes differences in moral beliefs can be attributed to differences in context or circumstance. For instance, what is considered right or wrong might vary depending on the specific situation or cultural background. However, this doesn't mean that morality is relative, but rather that the application of moral principles can differ in different contexts. Here she is just trying to explain that, just because different people have different opinions on what is the best food, it doesn't mean that there is no objective standard for what is nutritious or healthy. Similarly, moral diversity doesn't necessarily mean that there is no universal moral truth. Here, she asserts that you don't have to believe that morality is relative to culture (moral relativism) to understand that certain actions are considered wrong in one place but not in another, simply because of different rules or norms. For example, driving on the right side of the road is considered wrong in England, where the norm is to drive on the left, while in France, driving on the right is the norm and therefore not

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. P.97.

<sup>12</sup> Kohlberg, L. (1981): *Essays on Moral Development*, Volume 1. *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice*, San Francisco, Harper and Row.

wrong.<sup>13</sup> So, moral relativism is not necessary to acknowledge that certain actions are considered wrong or right depending on the context or location. Different places can have different rules, norms, or laws that shape what is considered right or wrong. These variations in what is considered right or wrong don't necessarily imply a relativistic view of morality but rather recognize the importance of context and local norms. Here she wants to claim that, just as you need to follow different traffic rules in different countries, you also need to be aware of different social norms and expectations in different cultures. This doesn't mean that morality is relative, but rather that context matters. She also mentions that, just because many people have different moral beliefs (moral diversity), it doesn't automatically mean that there is no universal moral truth (moral absolutism). Moral diversity doesn't directly disprove moral absolutism. However, the fact that there is so much moral diversity suggests that moral absolutism is unlikely to be true. The best explanation for moral diversity is that moral beliefs are shaped by various factors like culture, history, and personal experiences, which makes it reasonable to infer that moral absolutism is not the case. For instance, if people from different cultures and backgrounds have vastly different moral beliefs, it's likely that morality is not absolute but rather shaped by various factors. This doesn't prove that moral absolutism is false, but it makes it a less plausible or less convincing explanation.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

Based on the above discussion, we can conclude by saying that, Harman's perspective on moral relativism is a more effective and acceptable view in modern times as it acknowledges and respects the cultural differences and beliefs of individuals. Here, I endorse Harman's view, as it is more compatible with the prevailing attitudes and norms of contemporary society. It claims that there is no single moral framework that has a special status as the absolute truth and is superior to all others. It can be stated that no moral framework has an exclusive claim to

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<sup>13</sup> Harman, G., and Thomson, J.J., (1996): *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, Blackwell Publishers, P.10.

being the “one true morality”. Each framework has its own strengths and weaknesses, and none can be objectively declared the winner. It emphasizes the diversity of moral perspectives and encourages different moral frameworks, rather than assuming one is objectively superior to others. However, this perspective faces some serious criticisms and challenges. Several questions arise here as well. Like, how can we condemn harmful practices if all moralities are relative? Is everything just a matter of personal opinion? And how do we address some issues like inequality and injustice if morality is relative? It can be stated that, in some cases, moral relativism is often misunderstood and misrepresented, leading to a lack of clarity and nuance in its discussion and clarity. However, many refined and nuanced perspectives acknowledge and respect the vast array of moral beliefs, values, and practices found across different cultures and societies globally. These perspectives focus on addressing the particular social and moral issues within each society, rather than imposing a universal moral framework that is supposed to apply to all individuals in every situation. Moral relativists propose that morality is pluralistic, which means different cultures and individuals can have their own distinct moral frameworks, each with its own legitimacy. If we look around the world, then we can see that in every moral belief, there is someone who disagrees. However, they hold their view with equal conviction. A reason to give credence to moral relativism is the notion that some moral conflicts may be incompatible, and thus, that cannot be conclusively proven or disproven, which suggests that we should accept that different moral viewpoints can validly coexist. Moral relativism is not just a philosophical debate, however, it has some practical consequences as well. It challenges us to examine our beliefs about right and wrong. It further affects, how we choose to live our lives.

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