

The image features a dark gray rectangular area in the center, which serves as a background for the text. Above and below this gray area are horizontal bands of abstract, colorful patterns. The top band is wider and shows a mix of red, orange, yellow, and green. The bottom band is narrower and shows a mix of red, orange, and green. The overall effect is a modern, artistic design.

Ethical Relativism

Introduction

- What is relativism?
 - Let's set out some terminology
 - 'Relative'
 - Identifies/tied to a relation; what is a relation?
Property that holds between objects or states of affairs
 - E.g. Jim Cook is tall—T or F?
 - Relation to context/ a midget or NBA player?
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Introduction

- Relativism: the view that the truth or validity of **all statements** or judgments in a particular subject area **is relative to some context**
 - That the truth or validity of **many statements** is relative to various contexts is just a fact; *relativism* is typically the view that the truth or validity of all statements or judgments in a particular subject area is relative to some context
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Introduction

- Different kinds of relativism—different subject areas: conceptual relativism is relativism about Truth
 - What is True is not an objective matter that applies to all minds, but it is relative (usually) to particular theories, conceptual frameworks, or traditions
 - We're interested in **ethical relativism**—whether **all** norms, values ethical judgments are **necessarily** tied to particular contexts
 - There are **two kinds** of ethical relativism: subjectivism or individual relativism or cultural or conventional relativism
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Introduction

■ Subjectivism

- The truth of moral judgments or the validity of moral values is **dependent** upon the beliefs, emotions, desires, or preferences (mental states) of the individual subject who is valuing (making judgment)
 - E.G. “Generosity is good” is true if and only if S believes (feels, etc.) that the generosity is good
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Introduction

- “Abortion is wrong” = S does not approve of abortion
 - What Lewis is criticizing:
 - “Waterfall is sublime” = I like the waterfall, or I have sublime feelings;
 - These are ultimately not statements about waterfall or property of waterfall; **it's a statement about me**, mental state or emotional state I possess
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Introduction

- i.e. its subjective—its about the subject
 - In popular terms: if it feels good, do it; it may be wrong for you, but it's right for me.
 - Hemmingway (Death in the Afternoon)
“So far about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after and judged by these moral standards, which I do not defend, the bullfight is very moral to me because I feel very fine while it is going on and have a feeling of life and death and mortality, and after it is over I feel very sad but very fine”
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Introduction

- Objectivism: The Truth of moral judgments or validity of moral values is dependent upon **properties of the object**, independent of the individual subject who is valuing (making the judgment)
 - E.g. “The world is round” is true if and only if the world is round (whether or not anyone believes it);
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Introduction

- “Torturing children for fun is wrong” is true or false in view of certain (moral) properties such action instantiates, independent of any given person’s opinion of it.
 - If something is objective then we can’t make it True by believing in a certain way; we have to adjust our beliefs and desires to reality
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Introduction

- Note: Subjectivism reigns
 - What's the importance of that to Ethics?
 - HUGE!
 - E.g. abortion—is right and wrong, etc.—are we trying to discover the correct way to think/act about abortion, or are we simply expressing our preference?
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Introduction

- If the latter “Vanilla is best” “Chocolate is best”
(just: I like Vanilla, I like Chocolate)
 - No rational resolution, persuasion—not really disagreeing; only way to agree or come into conformity is to *impose* one view on another
 - My argument may look like assertions of T/F judgments, but really are just expression of preference; no room for persuasion; only coercion; can't evaluate; can't reason about
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Introduction

- Ethics is taken out of the realm of rationality and becomes naked domination; power struggle
 - Lewis' argument is against subjectivism—some moral judgments are correct, some not—that can only be the case if they are about something (intentionality), map on to reality
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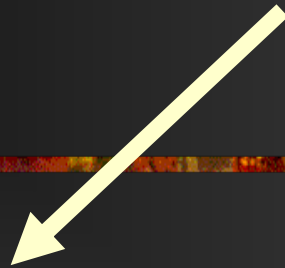
Introduction

- Sounds of dripping water are not equivalent in value to Bach's music
 - Saucer of mud thrown on wall is not equivalent in value to Da Vinci's paintings
 - Moral difference between stopping to help stranded motorist or running her over—not simply difference of opinion
 - 'torturing babies for fun' is wrong—not because I believe it; I believe it because it *is* wrong
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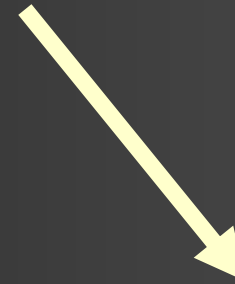
Introduction

- Conventionalism (collective relativism; Cultural Relativism): There are no objective or universally valid moral beliefs, principles, values, truths—all are relative to the beliefs, etc. of particular cultures, traditions, perspectives
 - E.G. “Slavery is morally wrong” is true
 - True relative to culture #1
 - False relative culture #2
 - So, simply true/false relative to moral beliefs of culture
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Classical Ethical Relativism

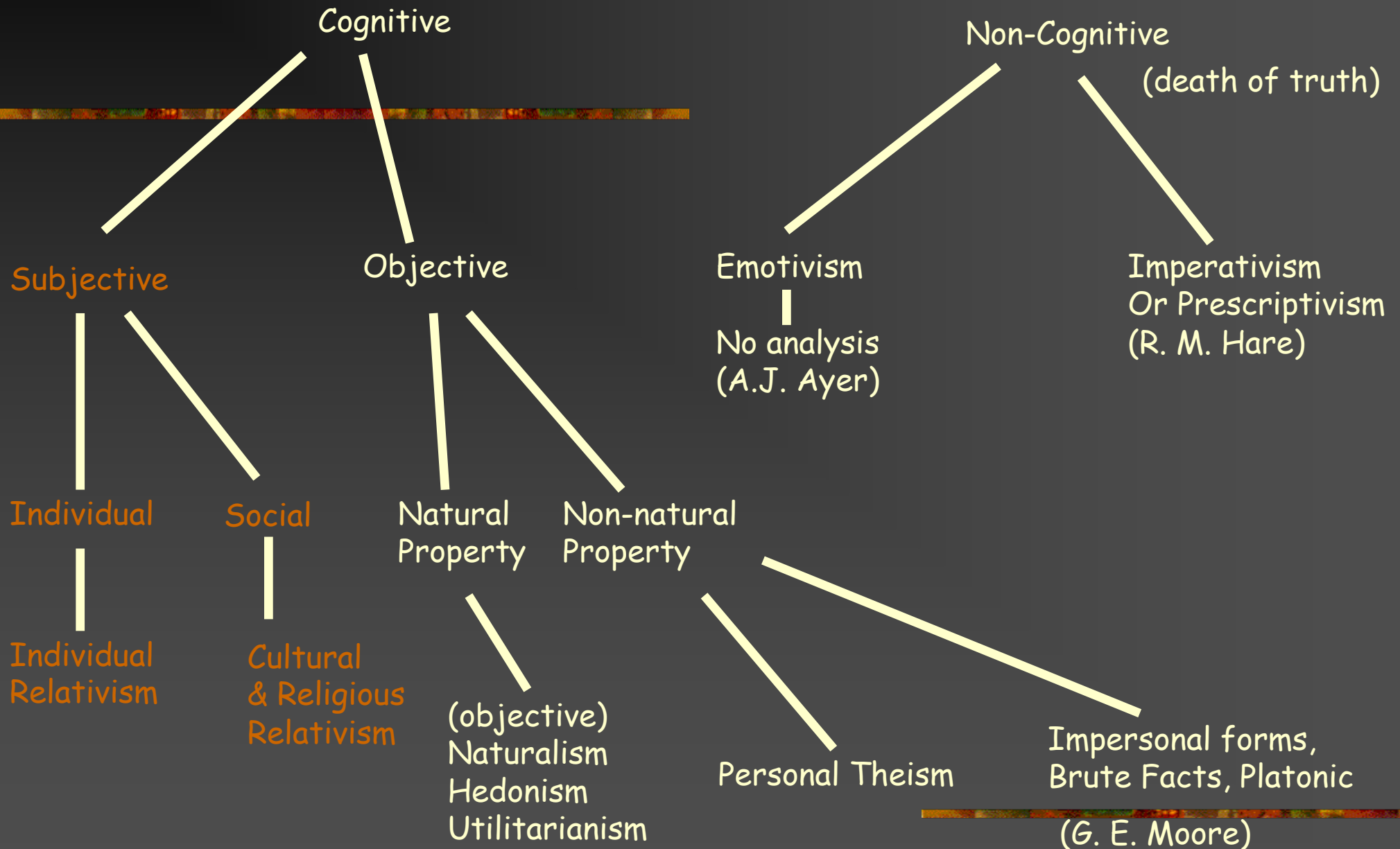


Subjective Ethical
Relativism (Subjectivism)



Conventional Ethical Relativism
(Conventionalism)

Moral Statements Schema



C. Stephen Evans on ER

- “Ethical relativists can be **individual** relativists, who hold that what is morally right is relative to the beliefs or emotions of the individual, or they can be cultural relativists, who hold that what is morally right varies with different **societies**”
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John Ladd on Ethical Relativism (ER)

- ER is the doctrine that the moral rightness and wrongness of actions varies from society to society and that there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all men at all times. Accordingly, it holds that whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he belongs.
 - Note: this sounds more like a definition of conventional ethical relativism
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Some Key Philosophic Questions

- Why and how do ethical relativists come to adopt (or hold) their position?
 - What kind of philosophic account do they give for how they arrive their view?
 - Is it an historical/sociological explanation?
 - What arguments for their position do they give?
 - Do these arguments justify their position?
 - From a Christian point of view is there a problem?
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Analysis of Forms of Relativism

- Classical ER should be distinguished from moral skepticism—the view that there are no valid moral principles at all (or at least we cannot know whether there are any)—and from all forms of moral objectivism or absolutism
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Analysis of Forms of Relativism

- Conventional ethical relativism (conventionalism)
 - The view that there are no objective moral principles but rather that all valid moral principles are justified by virtue of their cultural acceptance—“recognizes” the **social nature of morality**
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Analysis of Forms of Relativism

- The Diversity Thesis
 - Simply acknowledges the **fact** that moral rules differ from society to society and even from individual to individual
 - If there are moral principles that are common to every society (or individuals) they seem few at best
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Analysis of Forms of Relativism

■ The Dependency Thesis

- Individual acts are right or wrong **depending** on the nature of the society in which they occur
 - **Weak dependency thesis**—certain relativity comes from the way moral principles are ***applied*** in various cultures
 - E.g. respect in Oriental and Occidental cultures
 - ER want to say more than this
 - **Strong dependency thesis**—there are fundamental disagreements among societies not just about application
 - ER hold SDT
 - *Morality is the outcome of our social history*
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Analysis of Forms of Relativism

- ER in its classic form follows from the diversity thesis and the strong dependency thesis

Critique of Relativism

■ Problems with relativism

- Assuming we can make sense out of relativism, i.e., we can decide where different cultures begin and end
 - Still diversity is not an absolute—some values can be discerned especially after you discern differences between practices or factual beliefs
 - Even if true, strong diversity would not entail relativism
 - From the fact of different beliefs, nothing at all about their truth or falsity follows
 - Key issue: are ethical views conditioned or determined?
 - If determined you could never step outside them!
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Critique or Relativism

- It doesn't follow from the fact that every kid in my child's class got a different answer on the math problem that there's no right answer or that everyone's answer is equally right
 - May be that one got it right and others got it wrong or all got it wrong
 - Logically incompatible beliefs or claims cannot all be true
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Critique of Relativism

- Logical compatibility: ‘I have a brother.’ What about “I have a sister” is that compatible? Yes, both can be true
 - Log. Incompatible: ‘My **only** sibling is a brother.’ Then: ‘I have a sister.’ is that compatible? Can both be true?
 - But maybe the case could be made that moral relativism is true because ALL ideas are relative
 - Then you’re “tying” moral relativism to conceptual relativism
 - But conceptual relativism is either trivial or self-defeating
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Critique of Relativism

- Trivial: Benedict's argument is trivialized if you say that she holds that view because she has been conditioned (determined) by the social history of her community to believe that—she's really claiming more
- Self-defeating—she claims to have found some truth that is NOT culturally conditioned and that's a strong claim—she's taking the position she just tried to refute!

Critique

- Other issues

- There seem to be obvious absolutes

- You shouldn't torture innocent people for the fun of it

- They seem to be true whether we all agree they are true or not

Critique

- If moral truth was a social construct we might refrain from interference (on a theoretical basis rather than on some other basis) when it would be called for:
 - E.G. what about if Hitler murdered Jews for the fun of it, but ONLY within his culture—wouldn't it still be WRONG?
 - Makes everything a power play—no way to rationally settle inter-cultural disputes
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Why Relativism?

- Three Big Reasons
 - 1) Ethical Diversity
 - Great deal of different between cultures; one of values of overseas, cross-cultural experience; opens eyes; 'how I was raised' not necessarily only way to do things; getting married does same thing
 - **Fact** of different values, practices, rules
 - This is the diversity thesis
 - See Benedict's case in Pojman's book
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Why Relativism?

- 2) Conceptual relativism: all truth is relative to conceptual scheme, framework, etc.; it is a **global thesis**; Moral relativism is the local version; we always see through the eyes of culture (conceptual scheme, etc.), it gives us our eyes
 - Benedict: conditioned, institutionalized; we believe what our culture believes, can't get outside
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Why Relativism?

- 3) Tolerance: It is imperialism to assert you have a corner on the truth; need to respect others, be open-minded
 - Be loving, respect diversity; who are we to judge others? Who are you to cast stones, make moral judgments of others?
 - Bloom—part of democracy, egalitarianism, being nice
 - Moral realm: seems only morally right position to take: **everyone's right, because no one's wrong**
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Analysis of Forms of Relativism

■ Postscript:

■ Tolerance thesis:

- If Morality is relative to its culture, then there is no **independent basis** for criticizing the morality of any culture but one's own
- If there is no independent way of criticizing any other culture, we ought to be tolerant of the moralities of other cultures
- Morality **is relative** to its culture
- Therefore we ought to be ***tolerant*** of the moralities of other cultures

■ What ways can you critique this view?

Analysis of Forms of Relativism

- Subjective ethical relativism (subjectivism)
 - They hold rather than morality being dependent on society, morality is dependent on the individual
 - It rejects social agreement of principle (as the conventionalist maintains)
 - It rejects an objectively independent set of norms that bind together all people for the common good
 - In what ways can you critique this view?
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