

Skepticism and Objectivism in Ethics

PHI 300
(Erion)

moral skepticism - claims that moral standards are *not* objective; most often comes in one of two varieties:

- (1) *ethical relativism* - moral standards are not objective, but determined by *society*; if a society believes that something is right (or wrong), then it is right (or wrong)
- (2) *ethical subjectivism* - moral standards are not objective, but determined by *individuals*; if an individual believes that something is right (or wrong), then it is right (or wrong)

moral objectivism - claims that moral standards *are* objective; most often comes in one of two varieties:

- (1) *moral absolutism* - there is one correct moral code that applies to all people at all times in all societies
- (2) *qualified objectivism* - denies universal or absolute moral rules, but still claims that qualified moral rules are objective (i.e., "In circumstance C for person P, lying is wrong")

* note: moral objectivists need not claim to *know* the objective moral standards, but only that these standards are objective

Though Rachels does not seem to do so, it is important to distinguish *cultural relativism* from *ethical relativism*:

- (1) *cultural relativism* - different societies can have different, and sometimes incompatible, beliefs about morality; this is a *scientific* position *with a great deal of evidence to support it* (see anthropology, sociology, etc.)
- (2) *ethical relativism* - moral standards are not objective, but determined by society; this is a *philosophical* position *with questionable support* (see below)

In what Rachels calls the *cultural differences argument* (a very influential argument), cultural relativism is used as a premise to support ethical relativism:

- (P) Different societies have different, incompatible beliefs about morality.
- (C) Therefore, moral standards are determined by society, and there is no objective truth in ethics.

Though the premise here seems likely to be true, we must also ask whether the cultural differences argument is valid; is it? (See Rachels pp. 19-21 for discussion.)